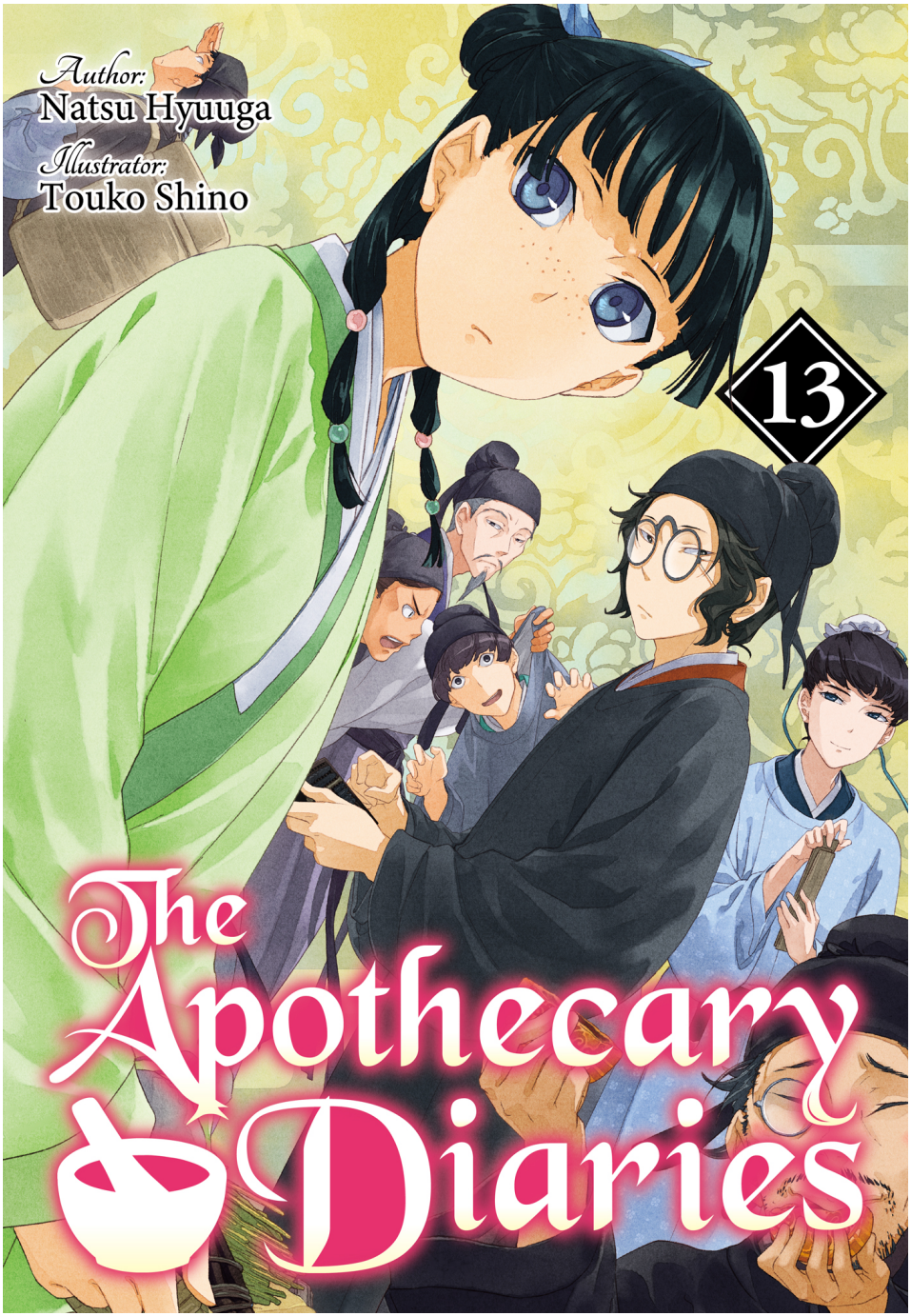
Author:
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Illustrator:
Touko Shino
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Author
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Illustration
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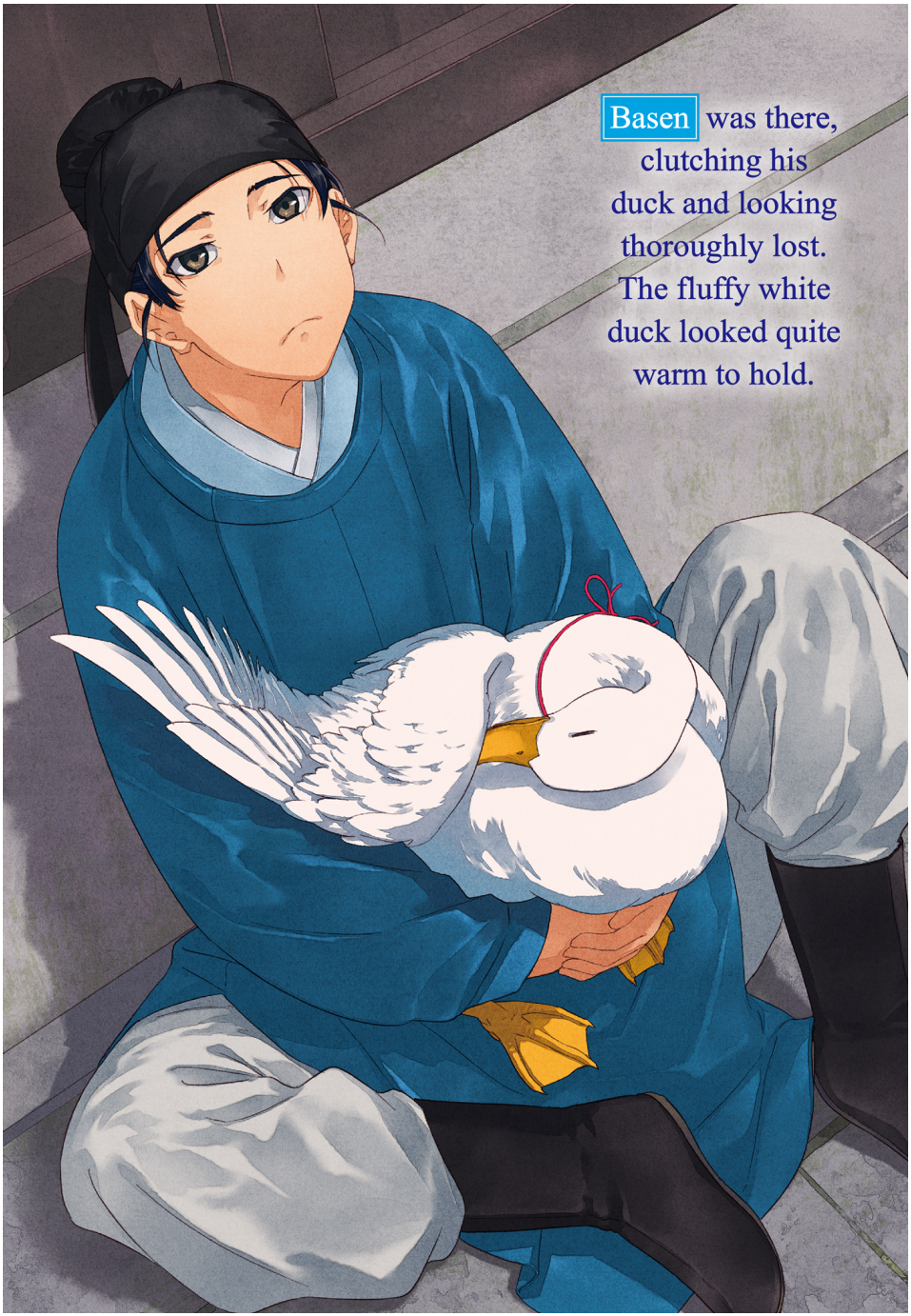
13
"All right, but...this is Maomao we're talking about."


Basen was there, clutching his duck and looking thoroughly lost. The fluffy white duck looked quite warm to hold.

"There, there,
Chue drawled, doing some sleight of hand to distract him.

The office had been given particularly high ceilings with a few good, sturdy rafters after Lakan had expressed the desire to have a hammock. As it turned out, however, he was so decidedly *un*-athletic that he couldn't actually get in the hammock.

"Having accepted your feelings, Master Jinshi, I also accept what comes with them, even having relations."
Jinshi bit his lip hard.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Those Far-Off Days of Peace

Things in the western capital have finally started to settle down, and Maomao is back home for the first time in a year. She's decided to accept Jinshi, but she knows there are big challenges with that. For one thing, not all of the people at court believe Empress Gyokuyou's son is fit to be the heir apparent, and they're casting about for other members of the Imperial family who could stand in his place—members like Jinshi, of course, as well as Consort Lihua's young prince—and they're even looking generations back through the Imperial bloodline. Those who stand near the top of their nation's hierarchy can't expect peaceful days.

Everyone in the capital has their own story, and this volume brings us glimpses of life from the perspective of Maomao's friends and acquaintances. How do they think? How do they live?

And how, exactly, will Maomao accept Jinshi?

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Character Profiles

Maomao
A former pleasure-district apothecary. After a stint in the rear palace and then the royal court, she now finds herself an assistant to the medical office. With things finally calm again in the western capital, she's come home for the first time in a year. She's finally started to seriously entertain Jinshi's feelings, but given his position, she knows there are going to be challenges. Twenty-one years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. In the end, he has to go back to the royal capital without ever having gotten his revenge on Rikuson. He's on cloud nine now that his feelings finally seem to be getting through to Maomao, but because of his position, he has a lot still to think about. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-two years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Brings his duck, Jofu, home with him from the western capital. He has feelings for His Majesty's former consort Lishu. Twenty-two years old.

Chue
Wife of Gaoshun's son Baryou. She acts silly, but she's a member of the Mi clan and an expert at gathering intelligence. When rescuing Maomao, she sustained injuries so serious that she can no longer use her dominant hand.

Lahan's Brother
Older brother of Lakan's adopted son Lahan. He's actually a very capable person, but because he doesn't realize that, he always seems to come up with the short end of the stick. Perhaps because he shares his name (first and last!) with another young man in the

western capital, he was left behind by mistake.

Lahan
Lakan's nephew and adopted son. A small man with round glasses, he's been looking after his father's house in the royal capital during Lakan's absence. A very capable and thorough bureaucrat. Loves numbers. Twenty-two years old.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's finally back in the capital after a year away, but he still marches to the beat of his own drum.

Rikuson
Once Lakan's aide, he now serves in the western capital. He has a photographic memory for people's faces. In truth, he's a survivor of the otherwise exterminated Yi clan, and has secretly exacted revenge for his family. Completing his life's work seems to have helped him relax, and he now spends his time tormenting the Emperor's younger brother.

Onsou
Lakan's current aide. If he'd had his wish, it would be to drag Rikuson back from the western capital.

Suiren
Jinshi's lady-in-waiting and former wetnurse. A real soft touch when it comes to Jinshi.

Jofu
A common white duck with a dark spot on her beak. She began life as an egg hatched by Lishu, but from the moment she saw Basen, they've been inseparable. Jofu knows how to get along in the world, and can find food anywhere she happens to be.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. She's the mother of the crown prince, but her appearance makes some feel she's not fit for her office. Twenty-three years old.

Yao
Maomao's colleague and Vice Minister Lu's niece. She may not know much about the world, but she's trying to make it on her own as best she can. Has recently taken an interest in Lahan. Seventeen years old.

En'en
Maomao's colleague, she's also Yao's lady-in-waiting. En'en is a big part of the reason Yao isn't off on her own yet. It bothers her no end to see Yao interested in Lahan. Twenty-one years old.

Tianyu
A young physician. A dangerous character who especially likes corpses and dissecting things.

Maamei
Basen's older sister. Since Taomei and Gaoshun, her mother and father, were in the western capital, it fell to her to run Ma clan affairs. She has two children of her own, and also raises her younger brother Baryou's son.

Dr. Liu
An upper physician at court. He and Luomen studied in the west together. He imparts stern instruction to Maomao and her friends.

Dr. Li
A middle physician. He went to the western capital with Maomao and the others, and the stuff he saw there has made him a tougher person.

Kan Junjie
A young boy who was brought along from the western capital for some reason. He has an extremely common name.

Ah-Duo
An old friend of the Emperor's; one of his former consorts. They had a son together. Thirty-nine years old.

Pairin
One of the Three Princesses at the Verdigris House. An amply

endowed woman with a gift for dancing.

Joka
One of the Three Princesses at the Verdigris House. She knows the Four Classics and Five Books by heart.

Chapter 1: Lahan and Sanfan

They could see a crowd at the port. Everyone had come to greet the great ships that now sat in the harbor. The Emperor's younger brother was returning from the western capital after almost a year away—no wonder everyone wanted to be there.

Lahan was one of those who had come to greet the Imperial younger brother, and now he observed the ships from his carriage.

"Master Lahan, may I park the carriage here?" came a polite voice. It was Sanfan—that is, "Number Three." She was a young woman Lahan's age, but she wore men's clothing and kept her hair neatly trimmed. If one didn't know better, she probably would have looked like a particularly handsome young man.

As to why her name was a number, that was because Lahan's adoptive father Lakan couldn't remember names. Sanfan was the third person he'd taken under his wing because he could see potential in her, so she was simply called "Number Three."

Sanfan was in fact the daughter of a merchant family, but after she had run from her parents' chosen marriage match in disgust, she'd come to Lakan and given him the hard sell on her skills. Normally he would have turned her away on the spot, but she had commercial knowledge as befitted the daughter of a merchant, and so he took her in.

Currently, Lahan and Sanfan were busy working their side hustles to repay Lakan's debts. Sanfan wore men's clothings in part to prevent people from underestimating her just because she was a woman—and in part as a reaction to her parents' attempt to force an unwanted match on her.

"Hmmm... Park right near the port, if you would. If you mention my honored father's name, they'll let us through."

"Very well."

Lahan took out a golden plaque inscribed with the character *La*. Ordinarily, such a thing belonged with the head of the clan, but if they gave it to Lakan, he would only lose it, so Lahan kept it on his behalf. Under any other circumstances, that would have been

unthinkable, but with Lakan the unthinkable was par for the course.

Some people joked that with that plaque, Lahan could make a bid for control of the clan anytime he wished—but Lahan knew better than anyone that if he made a play for the family headship, it was he who would be crushed. Besides, he had no interest in taking over. He was the one working himself to the bone to pay off Lakan's debts; he was as filial as they came.

"Incidentally, were there no other drivers available?" Lahan asked. Sanfan was holding the reins herself; that meant talking through the small window to the driver's bench, which wasn't entirely conducive to conversation.

"Hmm? Ah, no, not really. Hiring a driver would have cost money, and I had time to kill anyway. Waste not, want not, no?"

"I suppose. Yet when I'm with Yifan and Erfan, there's always a driver." Somehow it was only when he made a request of Sanfan that no drivers were available and she came instead.

“Oh?” She seemed intent on playing dumb. Lahan decided to let it pass.

Sanfan parked the carriage and got down off the driver’s bench. Lahan got out as well, leaving the carriage in the care of one of the bodyguards who had accompanied him.

The passengers were just disembarking from the ship, and finding Lakan was a simple task. The direction where all the shouting and swooning was coming from was where the Imperial younger brother was, whereas the strangely deserted, quiet part of the dock was where Lakan could be found. Nobody who knew Lakan’s reputation would get too close to him if they didn’t need to.

“Excuse me, thank you, let me through, please,” Lahan said, working his way toward Lakan. The old guy stood on the far side of a wall of people, looking beaten. In fact, the crowd had formed a perfectly circular buffer around him; it was rather funny. Lakan’s aide Onsou was leading him along.

Lakan was not one for moving vehicles. A carriage he could survive, but a ship was too much for him. Lahan himself was badly prone to seasickness, and moments like this reminded him that the two of them were truly connected by blood.

“Sir Lahan!” Onsou said when he noticed him. He looked even more tired than the last time Lahan had seen him; his year’s service in the western capital must have been trying.

“I’ve come to meet my father,” Lahan said. “It doesn’t look like he’s going to be much good to anyone for a while, so I’d like to take him home, if you have no objection.”

In principle, Lakan was a high official, and should probably have put in an appearance at his office to report after his return to the royal capital.

“None at all, sir, if you would be so kind. I’ll inform the Moon Prince for you.” Onsou looked positively relieved. “I think he’ll agree that this was the easiest way.”

“I think he might.” Lahan had one of the bodyguards carry his pale-faced father to the carriage. “Now,” he muttered to himself, “am I going to ride in the same carriage as my honored father?”

If he were honest, he wasn’t eager to be in there, where the air would be perfumed with the smell of stomach juices and other filth. Instead, once Lakan had been safely pitched into the carriage,

Lahan climbed up on the driver's bench.

"M-Master Lahan?" Sanfan said.

"I realize it's a bit tight up here, but we'll survive. I'm afraid that if I ride back there with my father I might be sick to my stomach, myself."

Much as he felt bad for Sanfan, Lahan couldn't ride a horse by himself, and he didn't have the stamina to walk all the way home. By process of elimination, that left sitting on the driver's bench beside Sanfan.

"Sigh! I would have liked to pay my respects to the Moon Prince, but so it goes. Next time."

Even if he forced his way into the crowd, he would inevitably be lost among the adoring throng. Lahan knew that he was just a plain-looking man, undistinguished in appearance and not even especially tall. In order to get people's attention, someone like him needed the proper stage to demonstrate his abilities, as well as information that the other person would be interested in. One needed more than just a fancy outfit; one could not simply overdress. Without anything to back it up, that would only make one look comical.

No, this was just like investing: Never let a good opportunity slip through your fingers, that was the key. The Moon Prince was a discerning man, not easily fooled. Lahan could not abide someone who was beautiful on the outside but not the inside—and from that perspective, the Moon Prince seemed to have been crafted by heaven itself specifically to meet Lahan's ideal.

"A whole year... I wonder if Maomao's at least got one in the oven," he mumbled. His younger sister occurred to him almost as an afterthought. Much as he might have liked to speak with her immediately, he would have to do something about the cargo in his carriage first.

"Master Lahan, shall I contact Lady Maomao?" Sanfan asked.

"Would you?"

"I'll ask her to stop by the mansion."

"I wonder if she will."

"I'll write that you wish to speak with her about the matter of her friends—although she might ignore you even then."

Lahan thought about it for a second, then said, "Very well, thank you. Please do."

Sanfan frequently wrote letters on Lahan's behalf, at least when

they were straightforward enough. Maomao didn't know Sanfan, but Sanfan knew about Maomao. The acquaintance only went one way.

"I will. We need Lady Maomao to come collect them as soon as she may," Sanfan said, oddly subdued.

As to who "they" were, the answer was apparent the moment the carriage arrived back at the mansion. Standing by the weird Shogi-piece-shaped object outside were two women.

"Master Lahan!" said the taller, slimmer one, approaching the carriage. Her name was Yao, and although she was still only seventeen, she was taller than Lahan. Behind her, looking on with a proper glower on her face, was En'en. These were the friends of Maomao to whom Sanfan had alluded. Lahan had allowed them to stay at the mansion once in order to have a favor he could call in with Maomao, but it had been his mistake—because for some reason, the two of them had never left.

"How was Maomao?" Yao asked, and her face was so perfect that even when worried, she looked positively lovely. However, that was all. Lahan heard alarm bells going off in his head: He knew he couldn't get any closer to Yao.

"I only went to bring my honored father back. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to collect my little sister. I believe I told you that when I left, didn't I?" Lahan replied—from a safe distance. The closer he got to Yao, the more frightening her servant En'en's face became.

"Oh..." Yao said, letting her hair droop over her ears and looking dejected. For some reason, En'en was *still* glaring at Lahan. She seemed to think it was his fault that Yao was upset. What the hell was he supposed to do?

"Is there anything else you want? If we stand out here talking, we'll only keep the master of the house waiting forever," Sanfan said, her eyes narrowed. Her tone was distinctly prickly.

"No, there's not. You must pardon me." Yao narrowed her eyes right back, while En'en gave the most brittle of smiles.

"Further, I believe the agreement was that you would stay here until Lady Maomao returned, out of your concern for her, yes? I'll arrange porters for you, so see that you pack your luggage," Sanfan said, and her smile was open and easy. "Since Lady Maomao has indeed safely come home, you must no longer have the slightest bit of interest in this household."

He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but Lahan's sixth sense

was telling him that he was standing in the middle of a battlefield.

"Hmm, yes," Yao said, thinking about something. "Could you perchance give us a few days? We've stayed here for so long, putting our bags together will be a time-consuming project."

"Heavens, and here I assumed your oh-so-capable lady-in-waiting would have everything ready like that. You know, I thought I heard that a relative of yours had gone to the western capital as well. Wouldn't you normally prioritize greeting them over Lady Maomao?"

"You heard right, but my uncle is going to stay in the western capital for the time being. The situation has his household in such a tizzy that there's no place for me there."

What was going on here? Their exchange sounded so polite, and yet Lahan could see sparks between Yao and Sanfan. Not to mention En'en, who continued to glare at him.

In any case, Lahan found himself with one goal in mind: to get out of there as fast as he could. He hopped down from the driver's bench and called one of the nearby servants. "Is a bedroom ready for my father? Make some congee, something easy on the stomach, and get some sweets—but nothing too fatty. Some fruit might be a good idea. Make sure the fruit juice is nice and cold."

"Yes, sir," the servant responded.

"All right. I'm going to go take care of the rest of my work."

Lahan trotted briskly away from the scene, trying not to look like he was fleeing.

Chapter 2: Lahan and the Dangling Corpse (Part One)

For Lahan, it was simultaneously a good thing and a bad thing to have his father back from the western capital.

"You must go to your office today, Honored Father. You should put up a good front, at least on your first day back," Lahan said as he watched Lakan drowsily eat his congee. Three children stood beside Lakan: From the biggest downward they had been dubbed Sifan, Wufan, and Liufan—numbers four, five, and six. They were a trio of orphans Lakan had picked up somewhere who now performed menial chores around the house.

Sifan was assiduously bringing the spoon to Lakan's mouth. Lakan was really just being lazy, but the wrong onlooker might have thought he had a thing for young boys. Had he been forced to feed himself, however, he would have drawn the meal out forever—much like a kid, in fact. So this was how it would be. In addition to the other three children was another boy, not yet old enough for his coming-of-age ceremony; he was substantially smaller even than Lahan.

Lahan didn't recognize the boy, but he had appeared the day before, saying he had been instructed to serve Lakan. From his facial features it was clear he came from I-sei Province, but *why* he had come was less obvious.

"Pardon my asking, but who *are* you?" Lahan said. "Did my honored father collect you?" Lakan had a certain habit of just finding people; the boy could have arrived that way. That would be all well and good if he was an orphan, but if he had parents, then it became a kidnapping. "If you want to go back to the western capital, just tell me. It's my father's mess, but as his relative, I'll take responsibility for making sure you get back."

Having the head of the clan back got Lahan out of a number of responsibilities—but it also vastly increased the number of problems he would have to solve. Getting a single child back home,

though, that was easy enough. Compared to compensating for an attempt to smash down the walls of the rear palace, he would manage.

"Not at all, sir. I've come to work. The Moon Prince commanded me to look after Master Lakan for the time being."

Lahan had no idea why the Moon Prince would have ordered that, but he said, "I see, I see. May I ask your name, then?"

"Certainly. I am called Kan Junjie."

“Kan Junjie...”

His name explained everything.

Lahan was a quick thinker, and when he heard this familiar moniker, he connected it with the fact that his own older brother had not returned from the western capital. Why was he there, while this boy Lahan had never seen was here? Now he understood.

His brother and this boy shared the same family name and the same given name, so they must have been mistakenly swapped. It was patently ridiculous, but that was exactly the kind of star under which Lahan’s older brother had been born.

“Now I get it.” Lahan nodded. In his opinion, his brother was a real jack-of-all-trades, but a master of none—except for pulling the short straw, if that were a trade. He’d been left behind in a far land, where he was probably working industriously at that very moment.

Lahan bore no ill will toward his older brother; in fact, he thought he was quite a good brother, and hoped to introduce him to a pretty girl someday.

Sanfan came into the room. “Master Lahan,” she said.

“Yes, what?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I found this among the master’s clothing, and I thought you’d want to see it.”

Sanfan held out a letter that smelled of a simple but high-class perfume. The sender wasn’t immediately apparent, but Lahan could tell who it was from the writing—lovely characters with just a hint of strength in them.

It was a message from the Moon Prince to Lahan explaining, in terms at once indirect and apologetic, who Kan Junjie was and why he was there.

It was largely as Lahan had surmised: Once his brother had returned to the central region, they would send Kan Junjie back home, and the Moon Prince wished the boy to remain in Lakan’s care until that time. With apologies to his brother, Lahan jumped at the chance to have the Moon Prince in his debt. He would love to do more favors for him, in fact—more and more, until there were so many they could never be repaid.

Lakan had finally finished his congee, and Sifan was wiping his mouth. Wufan and Liufan brought him his dessert fruit.

“Honored Father,” Lahan began, “before you go to court, I’d

like to inform you of a few things that are currently going on."

"Hrm? Everyone's still doing their jobs, aren't they?"

"Well, with you gone for a whole year, some breakdown was inevitable." Lahan placed a Shogi board in front of Lakan. Lakan thought of his subordinates as pieces in a game, and indicated their disposition via the board. It had confused Lahan as much as anyone at first, but after seeing it time and time again, he'd begun to discern certain rules. He wasn't perfect at it, but he could largely understand what Lakan wanted to communicate from the board.

"How are the pieces moving?" Lakan asked.

"Well, you see, this one has gone here, and this has moved here..." Lahan moved a Silver General inside the enemy camp and took away a Pawn. At the same time, a Lance was stolen by a Bishop.

"The Lance, eh? Always had good spirit, but seemed like a liar."

As a matter of politics, Lakan never joined any faction—but it was only natural for a faction to form around him, even if that was never his intention. During his absence, his faction had exerted enough pressure to keep opposing groups from running roughshod, but over the course of an entire year, the unwritten rule that one should never cross Lakan had all but eroded. One of Lakan's subordinates had gone over to another faction—but at the same time, his own group had succeeded in drawing someone from another group to them.

Before he'd left for the western capital, Lakan had given just one order to his people: "When I get back, I want everything to be exactly the same as when I left."

The result of that order had been the loss of a Lance and the taking of a Pawn. No doubt his subordinates awaited his return with fear and trembling.

Lahan had a thought: Perhaps it had simply been too much to ask a bunch of soldiers, people not normally versed in political negotiations, to maintain the balance of power within the court. He thought they should still get passing marks, but there was no telling how Lakan would react.

"I suppose we should at least see this Pawn we've picked up," Lakan said.

"Certainly."

Lahan picked up a brush, while Wufan and Liufan brought ink and paper, and then he wrote out the orders in such a way that the

aide, Onsou, would be able to understand them. He felt bad for Onsou, telling him to come to work the very day after he had finally gotten to see his wife and child for the first time in a year, but from the moment one became Lakan's assistant, there was no such thing as time off.

The boy with the exact same name as Lahan's brother was agog from the moment he got out of the carriage.

"This is the royal court? My! It's so much bigger than the administrative office in the western capital."

Lahan had been thinking about what to do with the boy; normally, he might have simply left him with Sanfan, but there was a problem: His freeloaders—ahem, Yao and En'en—had stuck their noses in. For some reason, they'd made a big show of doting on the boy, Junjie.

Sanfan and Yao didn't get along very well, and sparks constantly flew between them, although Lahan had no idea why—or at least, he wanted to pretend he didn't.

In any case, at least Lakan and the boy seemed to get along all right, so Lahan had decided to assign him to Lakan as a sort of junior assistant. If that made Onsou's burden lighter, it meant Lahan wouldn't have quite so much paperwork piling up, for which he would be grateful. Still, he had trouble imagining it would go as smoothly as all that.

"Say, En'en, are my bangs straight?"

"They're perfect. You look as beautiful as always."

From behind Lahan came the voices of his freeloaders. Since they were sending Lakan by carriage, it had been decided to let the young ladies come along. He could hardly have put himself and his father in a vehicle while the women walked.

"Master Lahan, it's all well and good to be courteous to women, but I don't think you had to go quite so far," Sanfan whispered to him. She was serving as their driver once again. Quite frankly, it would have been more efficient to have her doing other work, but Sanfan wouldn't hear of it.

"That's not your decision to make, Sanfan," Lahan said.

After a moment she replied, "Understood."

"All right. I'm going to see my father to his office."

Starting tomorrow, he was going to leave Lakan with Onsou—Lahan certainly wasn't going to spend his days babysitting him.

“En’en, let’s go to the medical office,” said Yao.

That would get the two of them out of the equation, which was something of a relief. Now that Maomao was back, Lahan fully intended to have them return to their dormitory. “See you later, Junjie!” Yao cooed.

“You too! Good luck at work today, Lady Yao. Lady En’en.”

“Gosh, you don’t have to be so formal.” Yao was surprisingly familiar with Junjie herself—and just when Lahan had been so sure she didn’t like men. Maybe it was because the boy was still so young that she was able to show him some decency. “You’ll be helping your brother and your uncle now.”

Yao and En’en were about to leave when Lahan motioned them to stop. “Pardon me, but the two of you seem to be under some sort of misapprehension.”

“What do you mean?” Yao asked, tilting her head.

Young Junjie supplied the answer himself. “Ma’am. My surname is Kan, but I’m not related to Master Lakan or Master Lahan.”

“Really? I heard what Master Lakan said yesterday. He said, ‘Junjie? I think he’s my nephew,’” En’en said, doing an uncannily accurate impression of Lakan. Come to think of it, she’d been making a midnight snack the night before—had she been trying to endear herself to Lakan? Lahan shivered at the thought.

“He’s not wrong, but he’s completely wrong,” Lahan informed them. “We’re out of time at the moment, so I’ll explain later.”

It was nothing short of a miracle that Lakan had remembered the name of Lahan’s biological older brother. He had not, however, managed to remember the man’s face. Thus he had presumably classified the young Junjie in terms like “he doesn’t *not* seem different somehow, but he’s probably my nephew.” Both of them were studious, hard workers, so perhaps they appeared to him similarly.

Lahan was seized by a fresh desire to help his brother settle down as soon as he could.

“Erm... Is my name causing any problems?” Junjie looked deeply uneasy. Lahan, Yao, and En’en all looked at each other.

“Eh. It’s all very complicated. Don’t worry yourself. More importantly, my honored father has fallen asleep again, so give him a good shove, would you?” Lahan said.

“Yes, sir!” Junjie said, and he and Lahan proceeded to shove the

sleeping Lakan's back.

Lahan was supposed to be done worrying about Lakan once he had deposited him at his office—but there was an unusual hubbub when they arrived. A crowd had formed.

"Well, now," Lahan said.

"What do you suppose is the matter?" Young Junjie asked. They looked at each other.

Onsou stood outside the office, and now, just hours after getting home, he already had a very grim look on his face.

"Sir Onsou. Whatever seems to be the matter?" Lahan asked.

"Sir Lahan. Perhaps you should see for yourself..." Onsou indicated the office with a significant glance. It would be quicker than explaining, he seemed to say.

Lahan looked. "Well, I'll be." Something very un-beautiful hung there. Namely, a man's corpse, dangling by the neck from one of the rafters.

"Heek!" Young Junjie said, terribly frightened. "Th... Th-Th-Th... That's..."

"A corpse, dead by hanging, yes. First time you've seen one?"

"Y-Yes... What is it?! What is that thing?!"

"I told you, it's a corpse. A dead body."

"H-How can you be so calm about it?!"

Young Junjie was all out of sorts, but for Lahan, a human corpse was nothing especially remarkable. The more people there were, the more corpses there would be; that was all.

The capital and its surrounding environs had some one million official family registers, although in Lahan's mind, that number had to be considered no more than an estimate. Taxes were levied based on the adult population, so in order to dodge the taxman, some people lied and said they had no children when they did, or claimed that their children had died before adulthood when they hadn't, or reported a man as a woman. Sure, some families probably also forgot to submit death reports, but no doubt there were far more people out there who were off the registers.

The court and the rear palace between them had tens of thousands of people—a significant population. The more people there were, the more chances there would be to see a dead one. If they rarely seemed to be found, well, in the worst-case scenario that was because people were successfully hiding them. Among the

soldiers, it wasn't uncommon for someone to take a hit in the wrong place during practice and die from it. There had been three recorded cases of just such a thing happening in the last year, along with eighteen people who had survived but had been so badly injured that they couldn't continue in the military. Not a large number, as numbers went, but one had to assume there were other cases that had gone unreported.

Then there were the bureaucrats, some of whom inevitably found themselves so hemmed in by work that they took their own lives.

"Seven cases last year, as I recall," Lahan said as he stood and studied the dangling body.

This corpse, however, did not belong to a bureaucrat: It was wearing a soldier's uniform.

"Why, there's one of those rain-rain-go-away dolls in here! Why, that's the biggest one I've ever seen!"

"Honored father, that's a human corpse."

As usual, Lahan couldn't be quite sure whether Lakan was joking or not. Young Junjie, unable to bear the sight any longer, had turned away and was covering his mouth. That would be the ordinary reaction.

Admittedly, Lahan wasn't eager to smell the filth the body had expelled, so he covered his nose with a handkerchief.

"What would you like to do, Master Lakan?" Onsou asked. "I can have the room cleaned up immediately, or else you can do your work in a different place today."

"If you can clean it up nice and quick, then I'm perfectly fine here."

"*You* may be, Father, but I'm not so sure about everyone else."

Lahan did not consider a dead body to be a beautiful thing. For a *thing* it was, once its life functions had ended; it was a person no longer. Besides, with time it would rot, and rotting was not very good for purity or cleanliness—so, in Lahan's opinion, not beautiful.

"This room gets good sunlight," Lakan said firmly. It was still the cold season, and it was crucial to Lakan that he have somewhere warm so he could take a nap. The whole gaggle of onlookers was watching Lahan and his group now. To be very precise, there were seventeen soldiers, ten civil officials, and three palace ladies gawking.

"By the way, who is this person?" Lahan adjusted his glasses

and squinted at the man. He wasn't keen to study the corpse too closely, but it was necessary to establish the deceased's identity. Lahan didn't see much prospect of getting his work done today.

"He's a soldier Master Lakan brought into his fold about two years ago," Onsou said. "Master Lakan described him as a 'Lance,' I believe."

"This is our turncoat, then?"

"Indeed. I have a record of his service I can give you, although it's more than a year old."

So this was the Lance that Lahan had captured on the Shogi board that morning. Lahan had known, and told Lakan, that the Lance had been taken by a hostile faction, but he hadn't known the Lance's face. Remembering people's faces wasn't Lahan's job; it was Rikuson's.

"And he just decided to kill himself in my father's office," Lahan mused. He looked around the room. The "Lance" was dangling from a beam in the very middle of the office, which had been given particularly high ceilings with a few good, sturdy rafters after Lakan had expressed the desire to have a hammock. As it turned out, however, he was so decidedly *un*-athletic that he couldn't actually get in the hammock. A pointless story of a pointless endeavor—except that the other offices were not built such that one could have hanged oneself in the middle of the room. Not far from the waste that had gathered under the body lay a toppled chair; perhaps the man had kicked it over.

Lakan's office appeared to have been left undisturbed in his absence. It had been cleaned, but in a cursory manner. Lakan's beloved couch had been dusted, for example, but the cobwebs on the bookshelves had not been attended to.

"Hmm." Lahan inspected the rope hanging from the rafters, the Lance hanging from the rope, and the overturned chair. "Father."

"Mm?"

"Is the culprit who killed this Lance—the man dangling from the rafters—here with us?"

"Mm."

Lakan indicated the onlookers with a jerk of his chin.

"What?" Young Junjie looked at the crowd, shock written on his face. "Wh-What does that mean?"

"Keep your voice down, if you please. We don't want the criminal to notice us." Lahan tried to be gentle in his reproof of

Young Junjie. He wasn't in the habit of wearing kid gloves with men, but when it came to a boy who'd been dragged here by accident due to a case of mistaken identity involving Lahan's own elder brother, sparing a bit of decency seemed the least he could do.

Young Junjie clapped his hands over his mouth. Obedient children were so much easier to work with.

"Who is it?" Lahan asked Lakan.

"White Go stone..."

The culprit might appear as a Go stone to Lakan, but Lahan couldn't tell them apart. He narrowed his eyes.

"Ah!" The crowd was dispersing, meaning the killer was going to disappear—but Onsou seemed to have figured it out. He wasn't quite as good with faces as Rikuson had been, but they were still his specialty.

"Sir Onsou?" Lahan turned to him, thinking what a lot of trouble this all was.

"Sir Lahan. You're not thinking of abandoning me to handle this on my own while you go do your work, are you?" Onsou placed a hand firmly on Lahan's shoulder and gave him a nasty smile. He was a soldier in his own right, and his grip was strong enough to hurt.

Lahan let out a breath, considering what to do, and looked at Lakan.

"I wanna sleep," Lakan said. "But first, I wanna go see Maomao."

Lakan's brain was built in a way that was unfathomable to the average person. He could solve problems without using numbers or formulae, but nobody knew how he reached his conclusions. However accurate his accusations might be, making them stick without further proof would be a tall order.

"Ahem!" Lahan flagged down a nearby lower official. "Kindly go to the medical office and tell them we need to investigate an *unusual* corpse. Those are the words you are to use—don't tell them it's a hanging corpse. An *unusual* corpse."

"An unusual corpse, sir?"

"Yes, and make sure you get it right. Oh, and since the medical apprentices are finally back at work, could you have them come as well? I suspect the medical personnel will leap at the chance to study a fresh body."

This was all Lahan's very indirect way of telling him to bring

Maomao. Absolute certainty was impossible, but he figured that there was at least an eighty percent chance that she would come. That ought to help the otherwise listless Lakan muster some motivation.

Lakan would give them their answer, but an answer alone wouldn't be enough. He would tell them who the killer was, but it would be up to Lahan and the others to figure out the motive and the manner of death. Both Maomao's specialties.

Lahan made sure his glasses were perched firmly on his nose, and then he sighed. He was going to have to spend a long time looking at something very un-beautiful.

Chapter 3: Lahan and the Dangling Corpse (Part Two)

When Lahan saw his little sister for the first time in almost a year, she was not looking very happy. It turned out there hadn't been any need to have Sanfan write a letter specifically to summon her.

"Hullo, Little Sister."

The very first words out of Maomao's mouth were "Scram, Abacus-Specs."

"Maaaooomaaaooooo!"

Lakan was right beside her and tried to give her a hug, but she jammed a broom handle into his cheek to hold him at a safe distance. Where had she gotten that broom? Lahan was mystified.

"Maomao, perhaps you could show a modicum of compassion for him?"

"Would you, in my place?"

"Absolutely not."

With that, Lahan turned to the two people who had accompanied Maomao. One was Dr. Liu, the head official for medical matters at court. He was a man of stern mien, of the same generation as Lahan's granduncle, Luomen.

The other was a much younger man, of average build and with a less-than-serious look on his face.

"So where's this dead body?" the young man asked. He looked inordinately interested, and Dr. Liu promptly rapped him on the head with a knuckle.

"That's enough out of you, Tianyu," the doctor said.

Tianyu—so that was his name. Not that Lahan cared about this information. To him it looked like Maomao had been accompanied by yet another troublemaker—but this troublemaker had given Lahan an excellent segue into the matter at hand, so he would let it pass. If Lakan tried anything funny, Lahan could just foist him on Maomao. Although he didn't doubt Maomao was having the same

thought about him.

"I'm not made of free time. Perhaps you would kindly show us the body? I expect the Moon Prince to give a report on our return this afternoon. I don't have time to dally," Dr. Liu said. It was clear that he was quietly angry. The report by the expedition to the western capital concerned Lakan as well. Lahan was as eager as the good doctor to get this over with.

"This way, please," Onsou said, leading them into the room. They had decided to wait somewhere other than the office, as the situation was clearly too much for Young Junjie. He was a dedicated boy, though, and had asked if there was anything he could do, so Lahan had set him to cleaning another room that Lakan sometimes used. It was stuffed full of junk Lakan had piled up there the way a dog might collect slippers.

"If you'll pardon my saying so, the La seem to go rather too easy on their own relations," Dr. Liu said, looking at Lakan, Maomao, and then Lahan.

"What's wrong with being smitten with my own daughter?" Lakan answered as if this were a perfectly ordinary conversation. You could lead a horse to a charged room, but you couldn't make him read it.

Dr. Liu was no fool; he had to know that nothing he said to Lakan would make any difference. He walked casually into the office. "This is our man?" he asked. The "Lance" was still dangling from the ceiling. Lahan had given instructions that the body not be taken down. "Can't get a very good look at him like this."

Dr. Liu narrowed his eyes, but the man called Tianyu was downright excited. "Wow! He's dead! He's dead, all right."

"You said the body was unusual, but it's just a hanging," Maomao muttered. She probably thought she had said it silently, but her thoughts frequently came out of her mouth in spite of herself. Lahan had instructed the messenger to say that the body was "unusual" because that implied the cause of death was unknown, which made it conceivable that there was poison involved. If he'd said in so many words that it was a hanging, Maomao would never have been interested. Lahan knew very well that Maomao would be loath to come to Lakan's office. He'd had to manufacture a reason for her to come.

"You found him hanging here? Doesn't that pretty much make it a suicide?" Tianyu asked. He was rewarded with another knuckle

from Dr. Liu.

"Investigate! Don't jump to conclusions based on the first thing you see. Making assumptions will only skew your judgment." He sounded a lot like Maomao's granduncle Luomen.

"I presume the fact that you've left the scene undisturbed implies you have some reason to believe this wasn't a suicide." Dr. Liu was already studying the body.

"That's right, sir," Onsou said, answering on behalf of Lakan. It was more appropriate for him to handle this conversation than for Lahan to do all the talking. "If it were a suicide, it would create a contradiction."

"What kind of contradiction?"

Onsou answered the doctor's question by presenting a piece of rope. "We cut this piece of rope to match the one around the man's, Wang Fang's, neck. We wanted to compare it with the distance from the toppled chair, to see if it would have been possible for him to hang himself."

If a person was going to hang themselves, they had to be able to get the noose within about thirty centimeters of the chair, or they'd never be able to get their neck through it, no matter how they stretched and strained.

To Lahan's eyes, the world was overflowing with numbers—and this contradiction was not beautiful.

"If he kicked the chair over as he jumped, then this doesn't make sense," Tianyu offered.

Lahan answered in lieu of Onsou. "The chair is lying with the backrest up. It would have to have spun a hundred and eighty degrees as it fell to end up like this. After all, it would be very hard to hang yourself facing *toward* the back rest."

Maomao was quiet, perhaps because Tianyu was being so loud. She continued to try to keep her distance from Lakan, who was holding out a snack; Maomao was sniffing dubiously.

"Hrm. I take it you didn't let the body down because there's something you wanted me to double check," Dr. Liu said.

"Precisely," replied Onsou.

"And the chair hasn't been moved?"

"Would you like me to call one of the onlookers to testify?"

Dr. Liu, it seemed, was a man who liked to be clear about things. He was suspicious where suspicion was warranted. He looked like he could be a hard man, but he didn't seem the type to

bend the truth, so Lahan didn't dislike him.

"I must say, I'm surprised you felt the need to come yourself, Dr. Liu," said Onsou, who apparently had hoped for some more junior medical personnel. His polite smile caused his right cheek to rise exactly three millimeters.

"It was the way you said to send the apprentices. They need someone to oversee them, don't they?"

In other words, he wanted to make sure his people couldn't be part of any cover-up.

"All right. Bring down the body, if you would."

"Certainly." Onsou summoned a subordinate and instructed him to lower the body to the ground. "If you would all be so kind as to have a seat and wait."

"Don't mind if I do!" Tianyu said, promptly claiming a spot on the couch.

"I'm happy to stand," Dr. Liu said.

"Me too," said Maomao, and the two of them did just that.

Even given that the rope holding the body up was cut before the body was fully on the floor, it was difficult work. The "Lance," Wang Fang, had been a military man, and built like one. His corpse was quite a heavy load.

According to the report, Wang Fang had first been spotted by Lakan two years before. Lakan, being an excellent judge of people and quick to act, soon hired him. The man was practically made for battle, and took care of the job Lakan assigned him in lieu of a test with no trouble at all. The report noted that Wang Fang was ambitious to the point of greed—but suggested that with proper oversight, it shouldn't be a problem.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been, but with Lakan gone, Wang Fang hadn't had that oversight.

"Finally got him down," Dr. Liu remarked. The body was laid out on a cloth, and it was so not beautiful that Lahan, quite honestly, wished he could avert his eyes. The skin, which had been supple in life, was now bluish and pale, and fluids seeped from the body's various holes.

"Tianyu."

"Yessir!"

Dr. Liu was telling the young man to take the first look. Maomao positioned herself behind Tianyu and peeked at the body.

"What do you think?" the doctor asked.

“You can see fingernail marks on his neck. They show he fought the rope, trying to escape.” Tianyu looked surprisingly serious. He might have seemed a frivolous person, but apparently he really was a physician.

Maomao nodded and also looked at the body. “I’d say he suffered.”

“I’d say he did.”

“Doesn’t one usually suffer when one is hanged by the neck?” Onsou asked, perplexed by their exchange.

It was Dr. Liu who answered. “If you drop with enough force, the joints of the neck dislocate and you lose consciousness. In which case, you wouldn’t struggle.”

“So it’s an easy death,” said Onsou.

“Not necessarily. Get it wrong and it’s going to be very unpleasant. I can’t recommend it.” At that, Onsou gave the most pained of smiles. Dr. Liu continued, “All right, take off his clothes.”

“Yes, sir.” Tianyu began to strip the body. Maomao helped.

“What’s this? You’re helping?” Lahan asked. From what he remembered, Maomao was under Luomen’s strict instructions not to touch a dead body.

“Because this is work. I have my old man’s permission,” she said. She showed no sign of fear as she removed the clothing from the corpse. Lahan wasn’t sure how he felt about the fact that his little sister seemed so used to stripping a male body bare, even if this one was dead.

“Maomao! Don’t touch something so filthy!” said Lakan. He was one to talk; he was covered in snacks. Lahan was almost impressed that he could eat in the presence of a dead man.

“From the livor mortis on the feet, I’d say this guy’s been dead a long time. How long would you say, Niangniang?”

“At least half a day, certainly. The reddening of the lower body is quite acute.”

Tianyu plucked at the skin. “Mm. From the toughness of the flesh, I’d say not more than sixteen hours ago.” Dr. Liu didn’t say anything, so he evidently agreed. “Even granting a margin of error, he would have died sometime in the evening or night.”

Lahan touched his spectacles. What had this man been doing here so long after work hours? “You do believe he died from the hanging?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” Tianyu replied. Again Dr. Liu didn’t contradict him.

“Do you think you can say whether it was suicide or homicide?” Onsou asked.

“Can’t tell that for sure. Like I said, the position of the chair makes me think he didn’t do this to himself, but I don’t think I could say for certain.”

This time, Dr. Liu actually nodded. Maomao, meanwhile, squinted up at the rafter overhead.

“What’s the matter, Little Sister?” asked Lahan.

She didn’t answer, but only stomped on his toes. Unfortunately for her, he’d packed material into the toes of his shoes, which distinctly blunted the impact.

“What’s the matter?” he asked again.

“I was just looking at the rope up there. I think it’s tied like a lasso. That way, you wouldn’t have to use a ladder.”

“A lasso?”

“Maybe it would be quicker to show you.” Maomao glanced at Dr. Liu for permission. He might get angry if she just started doing things on her own.

It was Onsou who gave her the go-ahead. “Do please show us, if you would. Is there anything you’ll need?”

“A rope similar to the one used in the hanging. And if you have a rock that can be tied to it, that would be helpful.”

Maomao hardly listened to anything Lahan had to say, but she seemed relatively pliant with Onsou. Lahan wasn’t sure whether Maomao realized it herself, but that preference for put-upon folks bore the distinct sign of Luomen’s influence.

“If I may, then.” Maomao took the rope and tied the rock to the end of it, then spun it around before tossing it up, where it arced between the beam and the ceiling.

“And how are you supposed to attach that to a post?”

“Look at the knot on the rope that’s up on the beam and you’ll get it. You do this—” Maomao made a loose loop with the end of the rope and passed the other end through it. “And then pull on this.” She cinched the rope tight to the beam.

“So that’s how it works,” Lahan said.

“That’s how what works?”

“I was just thinking, if it was homicide, how would they have killed him?”

The culprit would have been dealing with a powerfully built soldier—not someone who could be easily strangled. What if they

were to use the ceiling beam? Then they wouldn't have to have the strength to physically wring his neck.

"You hang him from the rafters by the neck—then you could kill him without having to be very strong." Not to mention, that would be no sign of anything but a hanging.

"Pretty much. Although it would still be impossible for someone like me." Maomao gave the rope a tug. She could hardly have weighed half what the dead soldier did.

"True enough. Even a man like me probably couldn't have managed it. Not for a burly, heavy military man like that. The possible culprits my father indicated hardly seemed like they could have murdered someone so large."

Lahan thought of the onlookers that Lakan had been watching.

"Culprits? You mean the old fart already knows who did it?" Maomao immediately scowled.

"Uh-huh! Daddy figured it out right away!"

"Ugh!"

Suddenly, Lakan was at Maomao's side. She immediately backed up. "Eat this...please." She just managed to sound passably polite, but there was nothing polite about the way she grabbed the nearest snack and flung it, like one would for a dog. Lakan went running after it.

"Don't waste food," Lahan said.

"He'll eat the whole thing and you know it." Maomao clapped her hands to get the crumbs off them. *Well, that takes care of that*, she seemed to say. Dr. Liu was looking at her like he had an opinion on all this, but he was loath to stick up for Lakan, so then he decided to pretend he hadn't seen anything.

"If you know who did it, why'd you call a doctor?" Maomao asked.

"My honored father may know who committed the crime, but he can't say why or how. I suppose we know how, now. Which leaves me wondering what the motive could have been."

"The motive, right..." Maomao glanced toward the couch.

"You know?"

"More or less."

"Enlighten me, Little Sister."

If it turned out the murder had been arranged by Lakan's subordinates to get back at the traitor, that would be a problem. Lahan hoped they could deal with this as quietly as possible.

“I don’t really want to say,” Maomao told him.

“You have to, or I’m going to be late for the report with the Moon Prince.”

Maomao didn’t look very happy, but she started talking. “The motive isn’t anything especially profound. The killer was female, yes?”

“Excellent guess.”

Lahan was genuinely impressed. Lakan had said “white Go stone.” In general, with him, white Go stones were women and black ones were men.

Maomao sniffed. “It’s very simple: The deceased is a man, and the killer was a woman.”

“That’s what it boils down to, eh?”

“Uh-huh.” Maomao looked down at the now naked body with disinterest. To someone who had grown up in the pleasure district, fraught relationships between men and women were nothing new.

“If you knew all that, you could have said something,” Lahan said, irked by his sister’s reticence. Still, he understood why Maomao had refrained from explaining the motive. Luomen, the man who had raised Maomao, detested baseless assumptions, and had instilled in her the belief that one should not speak too lightly, or based on guesswork alone—perhaps because those in vulnerable positions could so easily be brought to disaster by a few stray words.

“Very well. As Maomao won’t say what she means, shall I be the one to give the explanation?” Lahan asked. Once Maomao had confirmed that the killer was a woman, he had a pretty good idea of where she was going.

“No, I can do it,” said Maomao.

“Well, now.” Lahan wondered what it could mean for her to say that. In the past, she would have gladly let someone else take the lead, instead of having to talk herself. “I see there’s been some change in you, Maomao, but you should hold off. It would be better if I did the talking. Could you explain it to us?”

“All right. I’d like to confirm a few things, though.”

“Like what?”

“What kind of woman the killer is.”

“What do you mean, what kind?” Lahan thought back on the crowd of onlookers, recalling the women who had been there. “There were three of them, but I don’t actually know which one did

the crime."

"Three of them," Maomao echoed, looking up at the rafters. "You know, don't you, Lahan, that it would be impossible for a woman to make it look as if a big, strong soldier had hanged himself?"

"I suppose. You're suggesting that it would have been impossible for a woman to commit the crime?" The victim probably weighed at least twice what his supposed killer did.

"Then how do you make the impossible possible? Consider the motive, and the answer reveals itself. If one woman couldn't do it, what do you need?"

"If one woman couldn't... Ah. I see what you mean!" Lahan clapped his hands as the realization hit. It was simplicity itself.

Maomao didn't say another word, but only turned around. Maybe it was because of the steady stare that her boss Dr. Liu had fixed on her. He not only had to keep an eye on Maomao, but also try to restrain Tianyu's interest in the corpse. With subordinates like that, it couldn't be easy being him.

Lakan, meanwhile, was reclining on the couch, nibbling on the snack Maomao had thrown. It would be time for his midday nap soon. Lahan looked at him with a moderately conflicted expression on his face.

"Sir Onsou," he said to Lakan's aide. "Would you call the three women who were in that crowd earlier?"

"Right away."

"Thank you."

Judging from the position of the sun, they just had time until noon. Lahan half closed his eyes, his heart growing heavy.

Chapter 4: Lahan and the Dangling Corpse (Part Three)

The three women Onsou brought were all new palace ladies who had just passed the examinations this year. They were of reasonably respectable backgrounds; two of them were officials' daughters while the other came from a merchant family. Each of them, Lahan thought, was notably beautiful.

He'd also taken the liberty of summoning officials from the Board of Justice. They didn't get along so well with Lakan's Ministry of War, but there was no reason to go looking for a fight. Lahan wanted someone there to witness the entire affair.

"U-Um, may I ask why we've been called here?" Palace Lady No. 1's eyebrows dropped by three millimeters. The brief report he'd gotten about her had said that she was the daughter of a rural official and that she was staying with relatives in the capital. She had lustrous black hair.

"I can't believe you would bring us to the very room where something so awful took place. Surely you're not going to tell us to clean up the corpse?" Palace Lady No. 2 said, quaking. She was the merchant's daughter, raised in the capital, and also had lovely black hair.

"I— I w-w-want to go home!" said Palace Lady No. 3, shivering violently. She was the youngest daughter of a civil official, and like the others, was a raven-haired beauty. Each of their faces was quite distinct, but from behind they would all look very similar.

"This would make it hard to tell who was who even if we did have witnesses from the projected time of death." Onsou crossed his arms. Dr. Liu and the other medical personnel had remained in the room. "So which of these women is the criminal?" Onsou looked to Lakan, but he was asleep. Even if he'd been awake to point out the killer, it would never stick without a clearly defined motive and manner of killing—and Lahan would have found it unbearably un-beautiful to try to squeeze some forced evidence out of the

situation.

"I see you appear somewhat distraught over the fact that you've been brought here as suspects, ladies," Lahan said. As he was speaking to beautiful women, he wished to be as polite as he could —while at the same time hoping, indeed wishing, that they would turn out to be as beautiful on the inside as they were on the outside.

"Of course we are. This is a suicide, isn't it? Why in the world would you say we killed him?" asked Palace Lady No. 1.

"Me, a killer? Of such a great bear of a man?" asked Palace Lady No. 2.

"When did he die, anyway? If it happened yesterday, I can prove to you that I was at my house," proposed Palace Lady No. 3.

"Completely understandable perspectives, all of you," Lahan said. He looked at the three ladies, his smile never faltering. "However, there are several distinct problems with the suicide hypothesis, including the situation of the room and the injuries found on the corpse. Further, I think you all should know that alibis provided by your family or friends will not be considered compelling evidence."

The three women frowned at that.

"More importantly, did all three of you not have a motive to kill this man?" He pointed at Wang Fang's corpse, which now lay under a sheet. "This man was as greedy as he was ambitious, and I'm given to understand that he never saw a woman who caught his fancy without trying to talk his way into her bed. Quite a few officials saw Wang Fang speaking to all three of you."

"True, he *spoke to me*, all right. And not just a couple of times," Palace Lady No. 2 said with a sigh. "But he's hardly the only man to have made advances on me. Embarrassing though it may be to say so, surely you understand that many of the palace ladies are here seeking good marriage prospects?" Lady No. 2 was the merchant's daughter, and she had the force of personality to match—a type Lahan hardly disliked.

"I do indeed," he said. "Still, choosing an absent superior's office for a tryst is, let us say, in poor taste."

All three women blushed. That said it all.

"Whatever are you talking about?" one of them asked.

"I have a family member with a nose as sensitive as a cat's. She discovered a very particular scent on the couch that the owner of this office so loves."

Lahan hadn't been able to tell himself, but apparently those with better senses of smell knew right away. Maomao, having grown up in a brothel, was particularly sensitive to it.

In short, the very couch where Lakan was now sleeping had been used to do the deed during Wang Fang's assignations. It must have been a pleasant place for it; Lakan was very particular about his couches.

"Only a minimum of cleaning was done in this office during its owner's absence—yet the area around the couch was unaccountably cleaner than anywhere else. You may have thought you had tidied it up so as not to leave any evidence, but since we have someone here with an animal's nose, we knew right away."

Maomao was glowering at him, while beside her Tianyu was saying, "Shoot, and I sat on that!" As for Lakan, currently snoozing on the guilty couch, he showed no sign of waking up.

"S-Suppose this room *was* that man's little love nest. That hardly means we were the ones he was here with," Palace Lady No. 1 said, her voice trembling.

"Much as I might like to agree with you, I can't," said Onsou, stepping forward. "This is Master Lakan's personal office. No lady in the entire court dared approach it before he left for the western capital—they knew Master Lakan too well."

Lakan was unpredictable; you never knew what he would do next. So other officials resolutely kept their distance from him, and even the court ladies made it a point not to get too close, in the same way that nobody would willingly walk into a warehouse full of gunpowder.

Many had once made light of Lakan, seeing as he was the oldest son of a famed household yet was branded a failure. The criticism had rolled right off Lakan's back, though; as long as he could play his board games, he was happy.

Once Lakan saw that he needed privilege and power, however, he'd taken everyone he viewed as an impediment and had torn them up by the roots. Now there was an unwritten rule when it came to "the army's fox": Leave him alone. Don't even go near him.

"However, Master Lakan has been away for the past year. It was because you're all new here that none of you thought anything of using this room to meet a man."

Onsou was right. All three of these women had become court ladies within the past year, and they didn't know Lakan. Even if

they had picked up on the unwritten imperative to steer clear of him, it must not have meant much to them. Otherwise they would never have joined the gawking crowd in his office.

And there had been no other new court ladies in the last year except for these three.

"So your opinion is that one of us killed him because of a little jealousy? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but how would I or any of us ladies with our skinny arms have killed this man and somehow made it look like a suicide?" Palace Lady No. 2 said. Nos. 1 and 3 immediately nodded their support.

"I'm glad you asked that. I'd like to consider that very question right now." Lahan beckoned Maomao over. She gave him the world's most disgusted look, so he was obliged to go to her instead. "Could you give me some help?" he asked.

"I am here strictly as an assistant to the medical personnel. What help would you have me give you?" Maomao replied as if reading off a script.

"Since she brought up a woman's skinny arms, I thought this might be most credible if you did it."

"Surely not, Master Lahan. I'm certain your own arms, so pale that they appear never to have seen the sun, and so willowy that they don't look like they could hold anything heavier than a brush, would provide an ample demonstration."

Maomao and Lahan set to glaring at each other.

"Aw, help the guy out, Niangniang."

"If you don't help him, this will never be over. Just do it already."

Maomao shot Tianyu a dirty look, but she couldn't refuse an instruction from Dr. Liu. She clicked her tongue. "Very well."

"Toss the rope around the ceiling beam, if you would. Like you did earlier."

"Uh-huh." Maomao had dropped the pretense of politeness; she answered quietly enough that those around wouldn't hear.

"Here. Rope."

"Yep."

Maomao tossed the rope around the beam so it dangled down, then knotted it. At the end, she made a noose.

"You think that rope is enough to hold such a big man?" Palace Lady No. 2 said with a sigh.

"Yes—but it would be difficult to dangle him with that alone. I

have another rope here." Lahan passed a second rope to Maomao, who looped it around the rafter like she had the first one. This one, however, she didn't knot, but allowed it to hang freely. Lahan began to explain: "You make a loop in the end of this rope as well, then place it around the neck of the person you wish to ki— Maomao! Don't put that around my honored father's neck!"

Maomao had been making to place the rope around the sleeping Lakan's neck. If she hated her father, there was nothing Lahan could do about that, but he didn't want this to turn into *another* murder right while he was standing there.

"Niangniang, we've got the perfect thing right here!" Tianyu looked like he was about to pull the sheet right off the body, but thankfully Dr. Liu stopped him with another rap on the head.

Lahan was becoming very grateful indeed for Dr. Liu's presence.

Onsou brought a sandbag. “Here, use this.” The tied-off part would make a nice analogy for a neck, the perfect place to put their rope.

The beams of the ceiling were just logs, used as is, which meant they acted like a pulley, making it easy to heave the rope up. Except...

“It’s not moving at all, is it?” Palace Lady No. 2 laughed.

Lahan’s adopted younger sister Maomao was not very strong. The sandbag, measured out to be as heavy as the murder victim, was at least twice her weight. With a moveable pulley, which would have lightened the load proportional to the number of pulleys involved, even Maomao might have been able to lift the sandbag. But the beam, secured in place, only acted like a fixed pulley, which didn’t change the weight of the object being lifted.

Maomao strained, clutching the rope close, but instead of lifting the sandbag, she was the one who started to float off the ground.

“You’re right, it’s not budging. Well, let me help,” Lahan said. He joined Maomao at the rope, pulling on it as hard as he could, leaning all his body weight back.

“I can’t do this...and you...know it!” Maomao grunted.

“Shut up and...pull...!” Lahan replied.

“You’re not...even...helping! It’s not...moving!”

“Shut up, I said!”

As they sniped back and forth, the sandbag slowly began to rise into the air.

“Huff, puff!”

“Puff, huff!”

After keeping it dangling for some ten or fifteen seconds, the two of them ran out of strength, and the sandbag fell back to the floor with a thud. Maomao and Lahan followed it, panting. Lahan was not a fan of physical labor, but his demonstration would be the most persuasive of anyone here.

“The b-body had scratches on the neck, indicating that the victim clawed at the rope,” Lahan said, catching his breath. “Which wouldn’t be present if he had jumped from the chair and been strangled in an instant.”

The faces of the three women stiffened at that.

“One of you couldn’t have managed alone, true enough. But

two together, that would be possible, wouldn't it?"

Lakan had said something about a white Go stone, but not which one. Meaning maybe it was more than one.

"Listen to the two of you gasp for breath. Perhaps two people could have killed him, but it doesn't look to me like they could have hung him up," Palace Lady No. 2 said, in spite of the strained look on her face.

"Indeed. Two people could only just barely lift him, so it would be difficult for them to stage the hanging. That would require a third person."

The ladies' expressions grew tenser still.

Lahan somehow managed to calm Maomao down and get her to help him heft the sandbag again. When they had it up to about the level of the noose they'd prepared earlier, Onsou got up on the chair and placed the other loop around the sandbag's "neck." Then they cut the second rope with which they had hung up the bag, and it dangled neatly from the rafters.

"Behold," Lahan said. "You'll note that I never once said there was only one killer. The three of you all did it together."

With that, the three ladies broke down, weeping and kicking the floor in their frustration.

After a great deal of kicking and screaming, whatever had possessed the three women seemed to release them, and they quietly admitted their guilt.

They'd become friends because they had all joined the court ranks this year. None of them got along very well with the more experienced court ladies, which had only made their sense of solidarity stronger—so strong that they even used the same hair product, which might explain why all three of them had such lustrous black tresses.

Each woman had been sent to the palace with instructions from their families to find a good marriage prospect, and each woman had found Wang Fang. He'd approached each of the ladies separately, and you can imagine where it went from there.

Wang Fang had been under the impression that he had been juggling them quite capably, but a woman's intuition is not a thing to be taken lightly, and the three-timer was soon found out.

They say that when a case of adultery is discovered, a woman's hatred turns on the other woman—but in this case, the three women were already friends, and so their ire lighted on Wang Fang.

So it was that the trio conspired to kill him. Knowing that Lakan would soon be home, they invited Wang Fang to this office the day before the strategist was to return. Once one of them was laid out on the couch—the usual procedure in their trysts—and Wang Fang's back was turned, the other two women jumped out of hiding and threw the ropes around his neck.

"Women are indeed terrifying," Lahan said with a great sigh. If only Wang Fang had played the situation better. Maybe if he'd found some more-mature women who could have been more pragmatic about their games.

The only ones left in the office were Lahan, Onsou, and Lakan, who was still snoozing away. The folks from the medical office had gone back to work, and the ladies had been led away by the officials from the Board of Justice. The corpse was still there in a corner of the office, so Lahan continued to have Young Junjie busy himself with cleaning the adjacent room.

"I can't believe it turns out Wang Fang was murdered because of a bit of jealousy. I thought for sure there must be some other reason," said Onsou, sighing as he prepared a change of clothes for Lakan. The outfit was neatly ironed; no doubt he wanted to get his boss to put on fresh clothes before he met the Emperor.

"It might not have been *just* a bit of jealousy." Lahan looked long and hard at the three ladies' service records. In his mind, he began to see a number that united their histories.

"You think there might have been something else at work?"

"I would be very disturbed if there were, so I'm going to look into it."

Even as he spoke, Lahan felt a pang of regret. There went the rest of his day. But then, he'd expected that something like this might happen. He would just have to carry on.

Chapter 5: Jinshi and the Report

The thick rug in which Jinshi's knees were currently buried was stitched with a dragon, and the pillars to either side of him were carved with images of the same. The rug was flanked by high officials, all of them looking at Jinshi and the other returnees from the western capital.

Jinshi was bowing his head humbly.

"Raise your head."

Jinshi did so, and saw something he had not seen in quite a while: the Emperor seated on his throne.

"You must be tired from such a long journey. Are you in good health?" the Emperor asked.

"I thank you for your kind concern," Jinshi replied. Strictly speaking, he should have presented himself to His Majesty immediately upon returning from the western capital, but the Emperor had intervened to put the meeting off to the next day—that is, now. The exact timing of the meeting, after noon, was not a reward for a job well done so much as, one suspected, an act of consideration toward another of those there to make his report.

Lakan was diagonally behind Jinshi and looking sleepy. No one but he could be so unrefined as to yawn during an Imperial audience.

"Zuigetsu, have you lost weight?" the Emperor asked. He was the one man in the country who could use Jinshi's true name. Other people referred to Jinshi as the Moon Prince—a usage that had developed largely in contrast to the Emperor himself, who during his heirship had been known as the Sun Prince or the Noon Prince.

"Not too much," Jinshi replied. He wouldn't deny it: He had lost some five kilograms, but there was no need to give the exact number. Jinshi was less concerned about his own weight than about the streaks of white that had appeared in the Emperor's facial hair. The fact that he didn't dye them or try to hide them suggested he had said not to do anything. Jinshi thought he felt a throb from the burn on his flank, which should have healed long ago.

An Imperial ruler had a great many jobs to do and a great many things to worry about. No doubt what Jinshi had done just before leaving for the western capital was something His Majesty worried about very much indeed. The thought that several of those new white hairs might be his fault left Jinshi with a clinging sense of guilt, but he still didn't regret it.

Beside the Emperor stood his most important advisors. It was going on ten years since the Emperor's accession, and there had been much change among them. Where Shishou had once been, Gyokuen now stood.

Jinshi focused and began his report. "Ka Zuigetsu humbly presents himself to the Imperial presence," he said. As the Emperor was the only one who could call him by his real name, he was also the only one with whom Jinshi could use his real name.

Jinshi had already submitted a written report to His Majesty; now he went over only the broad strokes of his year in I-sei Province. He stole the occasional glance at Gyokuen—the man's expression never changed, though he must have felt something about the death of his son.

"You've labored mightily, I see." It was the Emperor's voice, calm and quiet as Jinshi had always known it. Before, when he had made reports, Jinshi had often found himself summoned by His Majesty in the evening. They would drink wine, enjoy some snacks, and Jinshi could go into much greater detail about what had happened. He wondered if such an invitation would come tonight as well.

His plan this afternoon was to give the briefest of accounts, then make his exit before Lakan did anything. In spite of how much had happened over the last year, it could be boiled down to a few brusque lines and recited quickly enough. That would be all, and then they could get out of—

"Ah, yes, Zuigetsu, that reminds me," the Emperor said when Jinshi had finished his report. "Perhaps you would visit the rear palace with me? It's been so long."

That was some invitation! A buzz broke out among the courtiers. It was well known that under the name Jinshi, the Moon Prince had once served in the rear palace himself, but there was a tacit understanding that it was not spoken of publicly. Jinshi felt as if the Emperor were playing some sort of prank on him.

The most appropriate thing for Jinshi to say at this moment was

probably “Surely you jest, Your Majesty,” but having posed as a eunuch for some seven years, he found it hard to answer.

“S—”

“I’m only joking,” the Emperor said. “You must still be tired. You should spend the remainder of this day resting as well as you can.”

On the one hand, Jinshi was relieved; on the other, he was reminded that the Emperor was still someone around whom he couldn’t let down his guard.

A few other people made reports after that, and then the audience was over. At least Lakan had managed not to fall asleep during the proceedings, but the moment the end of the audience was announced, he sprang up and raced out of the throne room.

Jinshi walked into the hallway, breathing a sigh of relief. Basen and several bodyguards followed him. Baryou had been present at the audience as well, but on the verge of passing out from being surrounded by so many people, so Jinshi had sent him straight back to his room.

“I’m to rest, am I?” Now that he had properly greeted the Emperor, Jinshi would have to also pay his respects to his mother the Empress Dowager, as well as the heir apparent and Empress Gyokuyou. After that, perhaps he could rest. He might even rest well, as the Emperor said. He’d managed to get through all his paperwork on the voyage home, so he could kick back for the next few days.

“Will you return to your room, Moon Prince?” Basen asked.

“After I’ve greeted the Empress Dowager and the Empress. Er... If I could ask you to carry a summons?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Perhaps you could call Maomao for me?” Jinshi said, slightly embarrassed. Lakan was long out of sight, and he was at least confident that the strategist wouldn’t overhear him.

If Jinshi wasn’t mistaken, Maomao had some affection for him. Otherwise, she would never have given him that kiss—or so he wished to believe. And believing wasn’t necessarily easy, after she’d spent so many years dodging him.

On the ship, with Lakan nearby and so many eyes around, there hadn’t been any chance to progress their relationship. Now that they were back home, though, surely it wouldn’t be so bad to try to

deepen their friendship a bit?

"You mean...the girl?" Basen asked with a puzzled tilt of his head.

"What? Is there a problem with that?"

Basen was not always the most perceptive of men, and Jinshi could understand why he hesitated to bring Maomao into Jinshi's presence. However, he was going to have to get used to it.

"No, sir, but the medical staff are back to work today, so I thought she might be as well. Would you like me to call her right away?"

Jinshi almost gasped.

"Moon Prince? What is it? Why do you look so...shocked and doubtful?"

"Nothing, it's just... I didn't expect you to say something so on point."

That made Basen frown. "My father cautioned me you might call Maomao before he went."

Basen's father, Gaoshun, had gone back to serving the Emperor personally. Jinshi nodded vigorously: It made sense. If this was coming from Gaoshun, then he wasn't just worried about Maomao —there might be something else at work.

"Shall I call her, sir?"

"No... You know what, forget about it."

Yes, yes of course: The Emperor himself had told Jinshi to rest, which was why he could take today off, but the others didn't have such luxury. It crossed his mind to call her when she got off work, then, but perhaps summoning her on the very first day she went back to her job wasn't the best idea. He was her superior, so she wouldn't—couldn't—say no, but he could just imagine the glare she would give him, as if to say *What do you want when I'm so tired?* That prospect held a certain appeal in its own right, but Jinshi quailed at putting his own desires front and center like that. He couldn't allow himself to forget that he was a person of status.

"Hmmm. All right, could you call Maamei, then?"

"My sister? I don't think that should be a problem."

Basen's older sister Maamei had remained in the royal capital. She was a canny woman; she would be able to fill Jinshi in on what had happened while he was away.

The Empress Dowager hardly seemed to have changed in the

year since Jinshi had seen her last—but she seemed surprised by the change in him.

"You've lost so much weight," she said.

"A great deal happened, you see..."

Funny, how she said the same thing as His Majesty. Did Jinshi look so haggard?

"Will you be visiting Empress Gyokuyou's residence after this?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like to pay my respects to the prince and princess."

His visit to the Empress Dowager was a brief one. She was his mother, but ever since he had entered the rear palace as a eunuch, she had become more distant. He felt like he should talk to her more, but somehow, he couldn't do it.

There was a great deal Jinshi had done in secret from the Empress Dowager, and he often wondered if he should divulge all of it to her, or if he should take those secrets to the grave.

His next visit was to the Empress's palace. Gyokuyou had quite a few more servants than she'd had in the past—more bodyguards, of course, but also more ladies-in-waiting and nursemaids.

Jinshi was met by Gyokuyou's head lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, along with several other women who had long been in the Empress's service.

"It's been quite some time—Hongniang, Yinghua, Guiyuan, Ailan," Jinshi said.

"Lady Gyokuyou awaits within," said Hongniang, guiding him soberly inside. The other three ladies were squealing, if not quite as much as they had before.

"Here you are." Hongniang showed him to a reception chamber, where he found the Empress along with a girl of some five or six years old. It was Princess Lingli, bigger than he remembered her, but the moment she saw Jinshi, she hid behind her mother.

"Princess?" he asked.

"My, what's the matter? Don't you remember your uncle?" Gyokuyou said.

Lingli only watched Jinshi studiously and refused to get any closer. To think, he'd once held her in his arms!

"Maybe she's shy with strangers," Gyokuyou said.

"Strangers?"

Why, Jinshi had known the princess since she'd been born. Back

in the rear palace, he'd checked in on her at least once every few days.

It was Hongniang who drove the point home: "It's been a whole year. You can't blame a child for forgetting."

The young prince had long since learned to walk, and now he toddled about, followed closely by several nursemaids making sure he didn't trip and fall.

"Just paying your respects today?" the Empress asked.

"I thought we might discuss the western capital—if briefly."

Gyokuyou raised a hand, and Hongniang bustled the prince and princess out the door. Only the minimum of staff were left in the room.

"About Sir Gyoku-ou..."

Gyoku-ou was Gyokuyou's older brother, and he had been murdered. True, they were only half-siblings, but Gyokuyou must have had complicated feelings.

"I've heard the story. I'm told that my brother's eldest son will succeed him."

"That's right. Sir Shikyou."

Shikyou was Gyoku-ou's oldest son, making him a nephew to Gyokuyou, albeit one older than her.

"He can be a soft touch at times, but he'll be all right."

"Were you close?"

"After my father told me I was to enter the rear palace, I spent some time at the main house being educated for the part. He may look just like Gyoku-ou, but he's completely different. Once he stands at the top, I think the foundation will naturally form beneath him."

Empress Gyokuyou's words were as good as saying that Gyoku-ou had not been fit to lead.

"What have you heard about the relationship between me and my brother Gyoku-ou?"

Jinshi paused. "That it was not a very good one."

"Mm. Well, for the record, I want you to know that I had no hand in this." She was quite firm.

"Nor I, ma'am," said Jinshi. They naturally fell into the way they had talked in the rear palace: She spoke casually, he politely. Perhaps it was because the ladies and guards left in the room were all holdovers from those days.

"I suppose not. What is the western capital to the Imperial

younger brother, anyway? A rural outpost. Let's be frank—a modest country town. Why should he bother himself with killing its leader?"

"And yet, there have been no end of rumors that I did just that."

"Hee hee hee! How can you convince these rumormongers that no one has less interest in power than you?" Gyokuyou laughed, but her words contained some sarcasm directed at Jinshi as well. She was one of the very few who knew of the peony brand that marked his flesh.

"Indeed. As I have said, Empress Gyokuyou, your enemy I shall never be," Jinshi said, deliberately using the same words he had spoken when he'd branded his own flank.

"And may I trust that claim?"

"You may."

"My enemy you may not be, Moon Prince, but I'm not so sure about others around us."

"I'm aware, milady."

Gyokuyou was Li's Empress, the Emperor's only official wife. Yet there were more than a few people who looked askance at her red hair and green eyes, so unlike those of the average Linese. And the prince had inherited his mother's traits.

Members of Li's Imperial family had commonly married close relatives, and there were those among the Emperor's advisers who felt he should have married not Gyokuyou, but Consort Lihua, who hailed from a branch of the Imperial line. Lihua herself, though, was content to do as the Emperor wished. So long as Empress Gyokuyou and her family did not turn to violence, she would never dream of a coup d'état.

And so it was to Jinshi that those seeking another candidate for the throne turned. Indeed, for the more than ten years before His Majesty had borne a son, Jinshi had been the heir apparent. In particular, one suspected the clan of Anshi, the Empress Dowager and Jinshi's mother, had a special interest in seeing him become the next emperor.

"I have no desire to sit where none may stand beside me," Jinshi affirmed. No one was allowed to sit beside the emperor on his throne, not even the empress—who was still his subject, not his equal.

"No, indeed." A slight smile crossed Gyokuyou's face. Before

Jinshi could discern what it might mean, she rose from her chair and went over to the window. She opened it and looked outside.

Jinshi turned and looked too. In the courtyard garden, a girl with brightly colored hair was holding what appeared to be an imitation tea ceremony.

"My older brother's daughter—that would make her my niece," Gyokuyou said. "She told me that she wishes to enter my service as a lady-in-waiting rather than go into the rear palace, so I'm having her train as an apprentice, as you see."

Empress Gyokuyou had always known how to wield both iron and silk. In the rear palace, the other consorts had scorned her because her homeland was so distant, but Gyokuyou had continued to build up the people around her. In less generous terms, one might say she was adept at beguiling other women. That strength was no small part of why Jinshi had recommended her for promotion to High Consort when he'd been a "eunuch."

"If she's not going to enter the rear palace, she could indeed become your consort, Moon Prince... Hee hee! Don't let her see your face, or she might have a change of heart and decide she prefers the Imperial younger brother."

"You jest, milady."

Though he brushed off her comment, Jinshi had attracted plenty of folks—men and women, young and old alike—in his time, so he was genuinely sweating.

"As you have made your resolution, Moon Prince, so I shall make mine."

"I've done many things for which I think I must beg your forgiveness."

"Beg forgiveness? Not from me, you mustn't," she said, raising her voice slightly. "Don't forget, there's another whom you've troubled far more than me."

"Yes, ma'am."

It was all Jinshi could say.

Did she mean Maomao, or His Majesty? Or both?

They were the only others who had been present when he had done what he had done.

When Jinshi got back to his own residence, Suiren was cleaning—not just tidying up, but going over the place from top to bottom.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Suiren, but aren't you tired from

traveling? You can relax."

Moreover, his home looked like it had been kept quite neat in his absence. To clean it still further—wasn't that the sort of thing a "demon mother-in-law," as the world called them, would do?

"Relax? Don't be silly, young master."

"Don't call me that."

"It's the least you deserve to be called, soft as you are! Look at this—I gave the place the slightest once-over, and see how much I found!" She cheerfully displayed some suspicious charms, several dolls, and a ball made of human hair, among other things. Jinshi was lost for words. "You may forget, young master, but you never know what they'll do when you take your eyes off them for a minute—young ladies in love, I mean!"

He *had* begun to forget, after a year in the western capital—this had been an everyday thing for Jinshi.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa."

"I also found a pair of underpants with human hair sewn into them—a real classic. You want to wear them?"

"Throw them out!"

"As you command." Suiren pitched the underwear into the trash bin without a hint of mercy or remorse.

The charms and dolls weren't necessarily all for love—some might have been intended purely to curse Jinshi. He had no intention of following up on each of the tchotchkes individually, though, nor of losing sleep over anyone so cowardly that they could only attack him in this most indirect of ways.

Then again, it was only because Jinshi was so thoroughly convinced that spells and curses were just superstition that he could act that way. Now, whose influence could that have been?

"Is Maamei here?" Jinshi asked.

"Yes, she is. I have her cleaning one of the other rooms."

Maamei was a formidable woman in her own right, but apparently even she couldn't best Suiren.

Jinshi found her in the living room, throwing an eerie-looking doll in the trash just as Suiren had been doing.

"It's been quite a while, Moon Prince. Don't worry—I'll make sure the refuse is burned later."

Maamei looked like her mother Taomei, whom Jinshi had seen so much of in the western capital, only half as old. Her father was Gaoshun, but his contribution was hard to spot.

“Pardon my abruptness, but could you tell me what’s been happening in the last year?” Jinshi asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “Let me begin with things that affect you personally, Moon Prince.”

Maamei didn’t stop cleaning as she spoke. She said that Gyokuou’s daughter would soon become Empress Gyokuyou’s lady-in-waiting, as Jinshi had already heard. Moreover, people were beginning to urge that something be done about a consort for Jinshi himself. To top it all off, the faction that supported Lihua’s son for the heirship could be seen beginning to act, trying to establish their chosen candidate.

“And then there’s...” Maamei said, but then she stopped.

“What?”

“Well, it’s merely a rumor...”

“Tell me anyway.” Jinshi sat in a chair and sipped some tea Suiren had brought—when had she done that?

“The Imperial family currently suffers from a dearth of male heirs. His Majesty has only his two infant sons, and you are unmarried. So there are those who...let us say they seek to make contact with this male-challenged royal family.”

“I suppose that’s not so surprising. I do recall the sovereign before last had a much younger half-brother.”

That would make him the former emperor’s uncle. Jinshi had heard that he’d fled his home while the empress regnant had wielded power, lest he incur her wrath.

“That’s right. And he has a son.”

A son from the male line—meaning he could make a claim on the throne.

“You think he’s plotting treachery?” Jinshi asked.

“No; his attitude remains as it always has been—he has no interest in politics. However, the rumor is that there’s another male member of the Imperial line.”

“Another male?” Jinshi cocked his head. “Of what generation?”

“Three generations back, perhaps. There was someone who was a member of the Imperial family, but ran afoul of the reigning emperor.”

“Hm?”

“He was stripped of his imperial status and executed, but before that, he had a child with a commoner woman. Or so the story goes.”

By Li's laws, a child born to one with imperial status could be accorded imperial status. Even if his mother was a commoner, if the child had proof of imperial paternity, they could be granted a place in the succession. Most such claimants turned out to be pretenders—and even those who weren't, one suspected, largely found themselves ignored based on whatever was most convenient for the court's advisors.

"That story would hardly pass for a fairy tale," said Jinshi.

"I agree, sir—it's drivel. But as the tale is out and about, I thought I should tell you."

This was what passed for a joke with Maamei. Such stories abounded. There was even a courtesan who used the royal character *Ka* in her name on the claim that she was an illegitimate child of an imperial sire. It seemed ridiculous—but then, there was always the case of Maomao herself, so the possibility couldn't be dismissed entirely.

"I have more to tell. What would you like to do?" Maamei asked.

"I'm getting hungry. Could I eat while I listen?"

"Certainly, sir."

Maamei had found another item in the meantime, a cushion embroidered with hair. She threw it in the trash. Jinshi was starting to think it would be quicker just to get a new palace, but then he pictured Maomao chastising him for the waste of money, and decided to keep the suggestion to himself.

Chapter 6: Tianyu's Medical-Office Diary

"'Scuse me? I don't suppose we can chop this guy up?" Tianyu asked, looking at the nice, fresh hanged corpse. Well, not *quite* fresh—it was a full day old at this point. The rigor mortis was starting to wear off.

The thought of rigor mortis took Tianyu back to his time dissecting animals. Before he'd set out to become a doctor, Tianyu had been a hunter. When he caught an animal in the hills, he often drained the blood and removed the organs on the spot before taking it home. Draining the blood kept the meat from stinking, while extracting the organs prevented their various juices, waste, and other contents from getting on the flesh, which saved it from going bad.

Tianyu was such a skilled hand at dissection that he'd even stripped the bones right out, but his dad had gotten awful mad at him for that. He said that if you removed the bones before rigor mortis set in, the meat wouldn't be as good. Then he demanded to know if Tianyu wanted to eat crappy meat, and gave him a rap with his knuckle.

So, this corpse was bone-in. The thought crossed Tianyu's mind—was the meat good, then?

"Will somebody do something about this guy?"

"Don't look at me!"

Tianyu's peers and senior colleagues knew he was always like this—they knew it so well that they no longer bothered to tell him off about it.

"Hey, Niangniang. It'd be all right if we just took the organs out, don't you think?" he said, trying to draw in the medical assistant nearby. Her real name was Maomao, but to Tianyu she was Niangniang.

"I think the moment you slice that stomach open there are going to be all *kinds* of problems, so you'd better not. And corpses

smell, so I think we need to dispose of this thing somewhere more appropriate."

Niangniang was organizing the medicine cabinet, her eyes shining. She was more into drugs than corpses. Apparently she was even better with medicines than a middle physician, and despite being a court lady, she was often treated like a full member of the medical staff. She'd even accompanied them on the trip to the western capital. Tianyu suspected that the reason Niangniang could look so energized despite only having been home from their long ship voyage for two days was because she was looking at all those medicines.

"You both look so upbeat, maybe you could do some real work," one of their senior colleagues suggested, but that wasn't Tianyu's decision. Perhaps out of consideration for their long journey, he and Niangniang had been assigned to do minor chores in a relatively quiet medical office.

"Why are they keeping a dead body here anyway?" asked Yao, who arrived with an armful of freshly washed bandages. She came from a family good enough that she didn't actually need to do this kind of work—Tianyu didn't know why she did it. Behind her, like clockwork, came En'en. She was Yao's servant, and Yao was always foremost in her mind.

"Oh, hey, En'en. Long time no see," Tianyu said, pointedly ignoring Yao to speak to her companion. Yao didn't seem to care, but En'en immediately grimaced. She would look daggers at anyone who spoke to Yao, but then got upset if people ignored her mistress instead? Tianyu didn't understand how she thought.

Tianyu had needled and barbed the two women, curious what would happen if they were to fall out with each other for a while. But today there was something else to interest him, and that was enough.

"Dr. Li... That is you, isn't it? Why *aren't* we removing this body?"

This time it was En'en who made the inquiry of Tianyu's senior colleague, Dr. Li, another of the physicians who had gone to the west. Tianyu shared the name Li, but to avoid confusion, people called him by his given name.

The reason En'en sounded so uncertain was because Dr. Li had changed more noticeably than any of the others who had gone. The slight, academic young man who had left on the trip had been

forged by the pounding sun and dry air into someone with ruddy skin and rugged looks.

He was also built like a log now, and more than ready to handle any of the many patients who came in. One time, he'd looked an angry brawler in the eye and told the guy he'd like to see him try anything, and Tianyu had found it so funny he'd clutched his sides laughing.

Stamina was the coin of the realm in the western capital, and through working with Dr. You—who was good-natured but sometimes a bit crazy—Dr. Li had grown into something of a jock. Maybe it was all the meat and dairy he had eaten to put on muscle, or maybe it was the mattress-padded post he punched and kicked to take out his ire at Tianyu and his crazed superior. Whatever it was, by the time he was done in the western capital, he had developed a fondness for soy powder dissolved in raw goat's milk. In the two days since they'd come back, more than ten people had already asked him, "Who're you?"

"You're correct, I'm the Li who came back from the western capital. As for the body, it still needs to be inspected to find out the particulars of the case."

Dr. Li was reading the daily reports from the last month or so. After his long trip, he had been confirmed for promotion, as he had shown an ability to do work every bit as good as that of any upper physician. Tianyu had also cut open and sewn up plenty of injured arms and legs, but there was no talk of advancement for him.

"Really, Dr. Li? I thought they already caught the criminal and did their examination—they're going to keep investigating?"

To Tianyu, it was just a question. Apparently En'en took it to mean he had time on his hands, because baskets of laundered bandages began to accumulate in front of him, and she was clearly pressuring him to roll the strips up and put them away.

"Yes, they're going to keep investigating."

"Makes sense," said Niangniang, who was discarding some medicine.

"What makes sense?" Tianyu asked. He might be better at dissecting animals, but in most other respects Niangniang knew more than he did.

"The culprits were three palace women. Statistically, logically, from-behind-a-desk theoretically, they certainly could have killed a single soldier between them. And sometimes a plan can succeed by

sheer chance. But that's just another way of saying that it was also entirely possible they would fail."

"But they didn't. Like you said, could be chance, right?"

"I don't know much about politics or the law, but was it really sheer dumb luck that their plan worked? Or was there something else involved? If there was, then we can't just go throwing out the body that might prove it—or hacking it up."

Dr. Li didn't react, seemingly suggesting that Niangniang was right.

"What do you even mean? You and the shrimp with the glasses proved what happened, Niangniang." Tianyu cocked his head, not sure what was going on. "We *can* dissect it, right? Right?"

"No! Hands off!" Dr. Li put down the reports and stood in front of the body. "And don't make too much of a big deal of the fact that we've got a body in here. You and I are used to this sort of thing, but you'll frighten folks from other departments."

"Yes, siiir."

Maybe Dr. Li didn't like the sound of Tianyu's answer, because he found himself absorbing another knuckle. It was hard to know if it was all the additional muscle, but Dr. Li talked with his body more than he had before.

"Yao, En'en, may I have a moment?" Dr. Li asked. The two young women had been listening attentively but quietly. "I've been reading the daily reports—is everything all right? It says the two of you haven't gone back to the women's dorm?"

"Really? Why not? This is the first I'm hearing of it," Niangniang said, looking at them. For some reason, her pallor was poor.

Yao said, "You didn't know, Maomao. The women's dormitory is full and there's no room for the newest palace ladies, so they asked for volunteers to move out. En'en and I were barely there to begin with, so it seemed perfect. We made sure they didn't touch your room, though. We did try to clean it occasionally. It wasn't too dusty, I hope?"

"No, it was fine. Thank you. So that's what you meant about leaving the dorm... Wait, does that mean you've been at *that* house all this time?"

Niangniang was starting to scowl. Tianyu felt a rush of curiosity as to which house "*that* house" might be.

"As a matter of fact...well, yes. We've even got some furniture

there, and going somewhere new seems like a lot of work."

"You've practically moved in!"

"Don't worry, we're paying for our expenses!"

"Master Lahan won't accept it from us, so instead we give it to a trustworthy servant," En'en said, although she looked oddly uncomfortable. Normally she backed Yao to the hilt, but in this particular instance she seemed to have some qualms.

Niangniang was looking up and off to the side. Clearly this subject made her uncomfortable. Tianyu's eyes gleamed as he considered how to break into the conversation.

He decided to take the direct route. "Hey! So! Where is it you two are living?"

"I don't know anything about it; the two of you are welcome to handle everything on your own. If I can occasionally get one of En'en's side dishes, I'll be happy," said Niangniang.

"Maomao..." En'en looked at Niangniang, beseeching.

"I've become a pretty good cook myself, you know!" said Yao, competing with En'en in her own modest way. They were completely ignoring Tianyu.

"Hey! So!" He was just about to try once more to forcibly include himself in the conversation when someone grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Get to work, will you?" Dr. Li's strength had grown so great that he could pick Tianyu up like he would a stray kitten. The physician hadn't gotten much taller. How much training had he been doing?

"The three of them are talking too," Tianyu pointed out.

"But their hands are moving."

Niangniang was writing down in detail the various medicines and their dispositions, while Yao and En'en were rolling up bandages and putting them away in the cabinet.

"This is your job," Dr. Li said, placing the daily reports he'd been reading in front of Tianyu one after another after another. "Look into any unusual cases in the reports and find out what happened. Got that?"

After a moment, Tianyu said, "Yes sir." He had the sense that if he didn't give a proper answer, the good doctor might just break his neck.

Chapter 7: Maamei and Her Inept Brothers

Maamei looked at her little brothers, whom she hadn't seen in nearly a year, and wondered what had happened.

"Long time no see, Miss Maamei! We're baaack!"

The first one to greet her wasn't either of them, but Chue, the wife of Baryou, the older of her two brothers. Chue had been an acquaintance of Maamei's—in fact, that was how she had come into the family—and she had always been the cheerful type, but Maamei had to wonder why she looked the way she did at that moment.

"What in the world happened to you?"

Chue's right arm hung limply at her side. Moreover, her whole body was covered with injuries, and her slightly muffled speech implied that she had sustained some damage to her internal organs as well.

"Oh, I just made a little oopsie, and now I won't be able to use my right arm for the rest of my life! Well, don't you fret. I can still do a few tricks with the other one. See?" Flowers and flags appeared in Chue's left hand.

Baryou, as usual, was watching his wife with lifeless eyes. Maamei did indeed "fret" about the state Chue was in, but there was another, bigger problem.

"Basen, what is *that*?" she demanded.

The younger of her little brothers had a duck perched on his shoulder. It hadn't been there when he'd come to summon Maamei on behalf of the Moon Prince yesterday. Where had he gotten it?

"She's a duck. Her name is Jofu," Basen said with a completely straight face. Her brother wasn't adept enough to tell jokes, which meant he must be serious.

"I didn't ask what its *name* was. Ugh, it smells like farm animal. *Both* of you do." Maamei covered her nose with her sleeve. Now that she looked closer, she could see that Basen's robe was streaked with poop.

“Mother, *what* is going on here?” she asked, turning to Taomei, who had also returned from the western capital.

Taomei squinted her differently colored eyes and gave her youngest son a look of resignation. “I told him to leave it behind.”

“And Miss Chue told him to fatten it up so we can eat it!” Chue chirped.

Basen found himself the subject of glares from both his mother and his brother’s wife. “Nobody’s eating her! Jofu is family. Would you have me eat my own family member? The lowest cur wouldn’t do such a thing!”

“Just tell me what’s happening,” Maamei said. She did remember that before he’d left for the western capital, Basen had been on some kind of “special mission” that had frequently seen him return home stinking of livestock. Had that somehow blossomed into love for a duck? Maamei had seen him frequently lost in thought and had assumed he was besotted with someone, but it never would have occurred to her that the girl was of the avian persuasion.

“Basen, this duck is female?” she asked.

“Yes. She lays an excellent egg once every two days.”

He was puffing out his chest for some reason. It was clear he hadn’t neglected his physical training while he was away; he’d lost some of the baby fat around his cheeks. Just when Maamei had been thinking he looked more valiant than before, she discovered that while his muscles might have grown, his brain had shrunk.

“Miss Maamei, Miss Maamei, it’s so cold outside, maybe we could hurry up and come in? You can see what a sorry state Miss Chue is in, and it’s ever so hard to stand out here!” Chue made a show of nuzzling up to Baryou. He flinched, but then wordlessly allowed her to lean against him. She didn’t seem to be joking; her physical state was clearly less than ideal.

“Very well. Your rooms are clean. I suggest you change your clothes before you pay your respects to our elders. In deference to the strain of travel, no banquets are planned until ten days from now. Incidentally, where’s my father?”

“He’s back with His Majesty.”

Her father Gaoshun was officially the Emperor’s servant, and what with reporting on the western capital and dealing with all the work that had piled up in his absence, he would probably be stuck in the palace for quite a while.

Maamei entered the house with Taomei, Baryou, and Chue.

"You stop there," she said.

"What is it, Elder Sister?" Basen asked.

"What do you mean, what is it?! I'm not letting any ducks into this house! Go put that thing out in a field someplace!"

"Well said, Maamei." Taomei nodded approvingly.

It looked like she had had this conversation more than once in the western capital but had come out on the losing end. If Basen could get the better of their mother in an argument, it meant he had grown in more than just his strength, and perhaps not in ways Maamei was particularly glad to see.

"It's unheard of to keep a farm animal in your room," Taomei added.

"Look who's talking, Mother. You had an owl!" said Basen.

"An owl is not a farm animal! And I didn't bring it home, so there's nothing wrong with it!"

Evidently there was some story as to what their mother had been up to in that far land as well, but Maamei didn't want to make this any more complicated than it already was. She decided to focus on Basen.

"Until you do something about that animal, Basen, you are not coming into this house," she said, and slammed the door.

"Sister! I promise I'll feed her and walk her!"

"Yes—at first! But you'll stop sooner or later."

"Sister! Jofu is a good girl. She won't poop in the house!"

"Says the man with his robe covered in bird crap!"

As Maamei was having this absurd conversation through the door with her brother, she felt someone tug on her sleeve.

"Mommy? We have guests?"

It was Maamei's son and daughter, as well as her younger brother's son. It had been part of the arrangement with Chue when the marriage had been decided: Sister-in-Law would handle all the child-rearing. The boy was Maamei's nephew, but she raised him essentially as if he were her own son.

"They're not guests. It's Grandma, Auntie, and your uncle. Don't tell me you forgot them?"

"Grandma?" the boy asked. A year was a long time for such small children. They'd been so close to their grandmother, but now they kept their distance. Only one, the oldest grandchild, seemed to have some memory of her and approached her.

“Welcome home, Grandma,” he said.

“My, you’ve grown so big.” Taomei picked up the boy, Maamei’s son, and stroked his head. At that, Maamei’s daughter and Baryou’s son went over to their grandmother as well. “Goodness, look at these children! When I left, they could hardly say hello.” Taomei patted Baryou’s son on the head and gave him a hug. Then she pushed him toward Baryou. “Here’s your boy. It’s been a whole year—give him a hug, will you?”

Baryou quickly, albeit with clear trepidation, embraced his boy. He might have been a bureaucrat who spent all day, every day glued to his desk, but apparently even he could manage to hug one small child.

Chue, meanwhile, studied her son’s face. “There, there, now, don’t cry,” she drawled, doing some sleight of hand to distract him. She couldn’t pick him up with that ruined arm—but it wouldn’t have mattered if she could, for she had no impulse to touch the child. She’d given birth to him, but she hadn’t, in her mind, become a mother.

“Who are you, Auntie?”

“Ah, I’m Miss Chue! An Auntie, that’s right.” She gave the flags she had produced to the children, then stepped forward. “Miss Chue will go on ahead back to her room, if that’s all right.” She moved with such lightness, but they could tell she was pushing herself.

Maamei glanced at Baryou. “Why are *you* unharmed? Your wife is wounded from head to toe.” Protecting the Imperial family was supposed to be the role of the Ma clan. “How did Miss Chue end up like that?”

“You’re the one who promised her she could do as she pleased if she would only marry me, weren’t you?”

“That’s some way to talk to your sister.” Maamei gave Baryou a kick in the shin, and he hopped up and down on one leg. “Now, who wants a snack?”

“I do, Mommy!”

“Snackie!”

Her nephew couldn’t talk very well yet, so he just raised his hand. If he was anything like Chue, he would grow up to have quite an aptitude for languages, but at the moment he only knew a few words.

“Mother, Baryou. If you’d kindly inform Grandfather that you’re back home. You’ll find hot water and a change of clothes in your

rooms."

"Very well."

Taomei and Baryou walked into the house.

Maamei gave the children to their nursemaid. She had more parts to play than just mother. Since the Ma clan men might die defending the royal family at any time, it was always a woman who fulfilled the role of family head, so that the clan could continue undisturbed.

Maamei would have to oversee the reports from Taomei and the others. She couldn't have them leaving anything out.

She opened a window that faced the rear garden. Basen stood there, clutching his duck and looking thoroughly lost. The fluffy white duck looked quite warm to hold. "I need to be present for the report, and so do you. How long are you going to stay outside?"

"You mean you'll acknowledge Jofu as part of the family?"

"You weren't listening. I said you are not to bring that duck in the house. If I let you in with it, then the children will want one. What if they each demand a duckling of their own, eh? What will you do then?"

"I... I see what you mean."

"Personally, I'm with Miss Chue. I think the best place for that thing is on our dinner table."

Basen begged Maamei with his eyes not to do such a thing, hugging the bird close. It was certainly not the behavior of a grown man, but Maamei couldn't help noticing that in fact it showed Basen had matured.

"You've learned to control your own strength," she observed.

"I'm not a child anymore," he said.

Basen's physical strength was overpowering, far greater than your average soldier's. It was all thanks to his naturally muscular build and his reduced sensitivity to pain. He had the capacity to shatter bones when frustrated, and for many years he had been haunted by his inability to control his own strength. Maamei should know; Basen had broken her arm when he was still little. It might have been his vivid memories of that moment that left Maamei's youngest brother with so little attraction to women—he had learned in that instant that they were fragile, easily broken.

Maamei looked from Basen to the duck and back. "I've got an idea. Why don't you take that duck back where it came from?"

“Oh, I could hardly go all the way back to the western capital now.”

“That’s not what I meant! The place you were going before you left for the western capital. Isn’t that where you got it?”

“Oh!” Basen gasped as if he were only just remembering. “No, wait... I don’t have any business there anymore, so I have no reason to drop by...” His face was bright red.

Ah-hah. Maamei’s intuition went into overdrive. Silly her—even Basen wouldn’t actually be attracted to a farm animal.

“If you don’t have a reason, you just need to come up with one. Suppose you’re there to return the duck, and just in passing, you pay a visit to whoever it was that helped you.”

Basen fell into an awkward silence. Just how bad *was* he at romance? Whatever—Maamei sensed that one more good push would get him talking.

“If she keeps ducks, I suppose she’s a farmer?”

“No!” Basen said firmly.

“A nun, then?” If so, the course of *that* true love certainly wouldn’t run smoothly.

“She didn’t abandon the world of her own volition...”

Basen was so simple. He might refuse to say exactly who the girl was, but a few leading questions would get it out of him.

Maamei’s information network might not be as extensive as that of the Mi clan, but it was formidable nonetheless. Was there anyone in Basen’s orbit who had been forced to “leave the world” in the past few years? One with whom he might reasonably be expected to have contact? Add in the duck factor and the answer became obvious.

“Tell me... She wouldn’t happen to be a former consort, would she?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Whatever do you mean?” Basen asked, clearly shaken.

Lishu, at the time an upper consort, had been pushed to take vows for the crime of sending the court into an uproar. In order to prevent any jealousy, she’d been admitted, so Maamei had heard, to a rather unusual kind of monastery: She’d joined a group of “wayfarers” looking for immortality. They experimented with a wide variety of farming methods and livestock, on the premise that you are what you eat, and so one’s diet might lengthen one’s life.

Lishu herself was a member of the U, or rabbit, clan. Her

mother had come from the clan's main house and was a childhood friend of the Emperor's. On more than one occasion, His Majesty had assigned members of the Ma clan to guard Lishu's person. According to the reports Maamei had seen, Lishu's biological father didn't treat her particularly well. Rumor described Lishu as a vile woman, so shameless that she had entered the rear palace of two different emperors—but the truth was that she had been simply, blatantly used as a political tool.

Lishu was something of a tragic figure—but at the same time, it was not the place of the Ma to criticize the doings of other named clans, so they had left the matter alone.

The U clan had declined substantially from its zenith. Lishu's father had been brought into the family as an adopted son, which was all well and good, but he lacked the acumen to carry a great house on his shoulders. Perhaps their status wouldn't have suffered so much if Lishu had remained an upper consort.

So, the object of Basen's affections was a girl of high standing, but one whose family was no longer so well regarded, and who herself was twice divorced and a nun.

"You certainly do have...unique tastes."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Basen said hotly. The duck had squirmed out of his arms and was pecking at the grass in the garden. "I'll thank you not to go slandering her when you don't know anything about her! She's a perfectly praiseworthy young lady, like a little flower waiting for spring!"

"I haven't actually said anything about her yet."

Basen's face immediately flushed. So he did still have a youthful streak—his impetuous outburst proved that much. He would probably never be able to be a close confidant of the Emperor like their father Gaoshun. He would be a bodyguard and nothing more, Maamei reflected.

"A little flower waiting for spring, eh?" she mused.

To what kind of flower might she or Taomei be compared? Some had told Maamei that she was like a vine, constricting and relentless. Considering that she had gained her husband through sheer tenacity, Maamei could see what they were saying.

Now, here was a problem: As much as Maamei herself was trying to spur Basen on, there was a real question of whether it was appropriate for him to be visiting a recused former high consort.

From a commonsense perspective, the obvious answer was no.

Still, Maamei hesitated to confront her little brother with this truth and urge him to give up just when he had finally taken an interest in the opposite sex. Was there nothing she, as his older sister, could do?

A woman of the Ma clan had one major weapon: her mind. She always had to be thinking two or three moves ahead, so that she could take command should anything ever happen to the men.

Purely in the interest of the clan, she should have simply told Basen to forget all about this girl. Yet that would have been to betray her ideals. At the same time, it would have been irresponsible to just thoughtlessly cheer him on.

Maamei was beginning to regret having given Basen such freewheeling advice.

"All right, Basen. For the time being, I want you to take that duck back where it came from. However, you should let them know you're coming."

"Let them know I'm coming?"

"Yes, that's right. Moreover, your work there is already done, so you absolutely must get approval from—was it the Moon Prince? Was he the one who sent you there?"

Any time you did something where there might conceivably be any kind of problem, it was important to have your superiors' fingerprints on it when the trouble started. That was Maamei's philosophy.

"Y-Yes, it was."

"Finally, when you go to give the duck back, I'm going with you."

"You are? Why?"

"Well, they must have more than just ducks there, right? I'm sure they keep plenty of animals. I'm going to bring the children so that they can get some hands-on experience. If I *happen* to bump into the honored daughter of a famous house while I'm there, so be it."

It came down to this: She needed to plant the seeds of a conversation.

The named clans met once every several years, and most of them could usually be expected to attend, except perhaps that band of eccentrics, the La clan. And it was nearly time for the next meeting.

The status of the U clan had declined, and it was largely Lishu's

father's fault, so Maamei suspected he wouldn't be there; someone else would attend in his stead. Maamei had an excellent excuse to participate: She would accompany their grandfather. She just had to make contact with the U clan. Then she could help the seeds she had planted grow.

"What did you do during all that time in the western capital? Don't you have any impressive feats to show for it?"

"Did I say I did in any of my reports? Without a war on, it's hard for a soldier to distinguish himself, you know."

In a world at war, Basen would certainly have taken any number of heads (literal or figurative). Then again, with his hard-charging personality, he might not have lived long enough to celebrate it.

"Fair enough. There did seem to be no end of tales, though, that some random farmer did all sorts of good."

"Yes. He really was a most excellent farmer."

"They were true?!"

Maamei wondered who in the world this person could have been. He must have been quite something, to make his name known as far away as the royal capital when he was only a man of the soil. Speaking of his name, she didn't actually remember what it was; it had been so common that it had slipped her mind.

"So what *did* you do out there?" she asked.

"Got rid of bandits and bugs."

"Right. That won't get us anywhere." Some years ago, the Emperor had gifted a middle consort to a soldier, but that precedent didn't seem to hold out much hope for them. "In that case, maybe we could lean on His Majesty's fatherly impulses..." The Emperor, she knew, regarded Lishu like a daughter. In that case, they would probably have to get Ah-Duo involved.

"What are you muttering about, Sister?"

"Oh, pipe down! I'm trying to think. Anyway, just tell the Moon Prince what you're doing! Got that?"

"Y-Yeah, sure."

"And make sure you wash and change. Leave the duck in the garden. Mother can't make her report without you, can she?"

"Yes, all right."

Basen said something to the duck and then left it with the gardener. As Maamei watched her impossibly naive handful of a brother go into the house, she pondered how to make her next

move.

Chapter 8: True Records of an Elder Brother

Lingering cold, clear skies

I did some crop treading. I got the local women and children to help me; we did about ten *tan*. Not bad work for a season when there isn't much farming to be done, but I wonder if there's anything else I could be doing.

Plum blossoms, snowy skies

Looking after the sweet potatoes in the storehouse. The trick is that you have to be careful of the humidity or they'll rot. Seeking some way to process them besides drying them.

Got a letter from Lahan. What could he want?

Spring chill, rainy skies

Lahan visited. Claims there's a job only I can do. If I succeed at this, advancement to court service won't be just a dream.

A man like me was made for more than farming villages!

Early spring, cloudy skies

In preparation for leaving my house for a while, I'm leaving oversight of the fields in the hands of a farmer I can trust.

Searching among the young folk of the farming village for a few people to come with me. Lahan tells me this worksite will demand people who are hale, hearty, and adaptable. Many families are loath to give up helping hands, though. I'll focus my search on people with few or no relatives.

Lingering spring, clear skies

Lahan led me to a harbor. I'm to go by ship?

The sweet potatoes and white potatoes with which I've been entrusted are packed in rice husks to keep them from rotting. Maybe Lahan plans to use them for trade.

Wait! Hey! What's Uncle Lakan doing here?!

Wha? No one said anything about teaching farming in the western capital!

Mid-spring, clear skies

Ocean, ocean, ocean.

The sight of my relentlessly vomiting uncle makes me glad that I cope well with moving vehicles. My uncle didn't remotely recognize me as his nephew. And after I told him my name so many times! I mean, not that I care.

There's not much to do on the ship, so I help with cooking in the galley or dangle a fishing line pointlessly into the sea. Call it obvious, but there's no soil to till in the ocean.

Spring in the air, cloudy skies

We make a brief stop at the country of Anan.

As a southern land, it has a wide variety of produce. Lots of fruit, but not many dry crops, presumably because the salt wind would damage them.

Bought some fruit seeds in the market—wonder if they'll grow in Li.

Spring warmth, clear skies

Arrived in I-sei Province. Grass and plains as far as the eye can see. Nothing here at all. Lots of land that could make for good fields if cultivated, but water is scarce. We'll have to find a source of water and see if we can set up an irrigation system.

Additionally, landfall has substantially improved Uncle Lakan's mood.

Vibrant spring, clear skies

We're going to stay in a sprawling mansion in the western capital.

Tried to organize my belongings, only to discover the seed potatoes I brought were missing. Apparently they got put in with the physicians' cargo and wound up in the medical office.

There was a vaguely familiar face there. I think her name is Maomao—she's Lahan's adopted younger sister. For some reason, she calls me "Lahan's Brother." Come to think of it, I never did introduce myself to her. When I try, she pays no attention. This is

why nobody likes the La clan. Its folk never listen!

Cherry blossoms, clear skies

I'm to go out to a farming village and teach them how to grow potatoes. Why should I come all the way out to I-sei Province just to do agriculture?

Everyone else seems perfectly relaxed—they all get to do work they already know. This is a pure swindle, is what this is. Why's Lahan have to be so crooked?

Geez, actually, this farming village is in rough shape. Don't they care about raising wheat? They're sowing at the wrong time, and they hardly even till the ground, let alone tread the crops. And this soil—it's so meager! Scatter something on it! Anything! Even ash from the ovens would be better than nothing.

Spring breeze, clear skies

I-sei Province sure doesn't get much rain. It's great that I came out to this village with Maomao and her friends and all, but now I'm supposed to spend a while teaching these farmers to grow potatoes. I have a feeling that white potatoes are better suited to the climate here than sweet potatoes.

Come to think of it, weren't people talking about a swarm of insects or something? I do feel like there are a lot of grasshoppers around. No matter how many of them you kill, more just pop up in their place. Pain in the neck. I'll dilute the farming chemicals Maomao gave me and scatter them around.

Fresh green, clear skies

The midday sun in I-sei Province is bright and hot, but the nights are freezing cold. These huge temperature swings have me worried for the health of our potatoes.

I finished my work at the farming village and went back to the mansion in the western capital. I found a goat there—I guess it belongs to some lady-in-waiting named Chue. Don't go leaving goats around! They eat grass, roots and all. Nothing will ever grow. They can eat weeds, sure, but if any of those animals started in on the crops, we'd really be in trouble. As if a goat wasn't enough, there was a duck too. I thought that building was supposed to be where the VIPs were staying. Should they really be cramming it full of farm animals?

As I was cleaning up my farm implements, a plump older man invited me to tea. He says he's a doctor, but he really reminds me of my great-uncle Luomen somehow. Although admittedly, he doesn't seem terribly concerned about his alleged vocation.

Since he'd invited me, I figured a cup of tea couldn't hurt, but then who should show up but...well. I'd heard the rumors. Hair black as lacquered thread, skin like porcelain, nose set high, and two eyes as dark as twin obsidians. A man of unearthly beauty, like a celestial nymph. The only disappointment was the scar running along his right cheek—but then, without that, I don't know what I might have done. His beauty was enough to drive a person to madness.

It was all I could do to swallow hard and answer his questions in the most stumbling fashion. Whatever he said to me hardly registered.

Which is why, to my chagrin, I answered in the affirmative. I couldn't possibly refuse.

And that's how I ended up on a trek across I-sei Province, a cross-country journey to spread the good word of potatoes.

Summer starting, clear skies

Creaking and shaking along in a wagon with my potatoes, I journey from village to village.

People frequently turn suspicious eyes on me, a stranger in these parts. That's fine; I'm used to it.

I remember when Uncle Lakan and Lahan chased my grandfather out; I got some truly cold looks from people then! My mother and grandfather kicked and screamed, whereas my father took to farming immediately. I had to ask myself what I was going to do. As a boy of ten, my only choice was to closely observe the adults around me and somehow find the right response to the environment in which I found myself. Truly, I did a fine job. Way to go, me.

When I think about that, scurrying from village to village teaching farming methods actually seems rather simple.

Ahh! When this journey is over, I'm going to find me a wife—a lovely wife who's not scary and is eccentricity-free.

Fragrant breeze, clear skies

I stay for only a short time in any given village. I must teach

them what they need to know in the space of just a few days. I tried using some of my precious supply of paper to give written instructions, but it's proven difficult. Literacy is low in the villages, so no one can read what I write.

I suppose I need to boil it down and teach them in the simplest possible terms, but without missing anything crucial. That's what I've been trying to do.

Maybe I'm becoming a better teacher, because if nothing else people have stopped looking at me like an intruder and started treating me like a welcome guest. One time one of the village girls brought me tea. She was cute, but I'm sure a girl like that already has a husband, or at least a man to whom she's pledged her future —I know these things. I can't go getting the wrong idea. Nobody likes men who think every slight show of decency means a woman is in love with them.

It's been interesting getting to know the foodways of this distant land. They seem to use bean sprouts to make up for what they lack in nutrients. I got some of the beans they use for this purpose, and I'll try doing the same thing myself when I get back to the western capital.

Fresh leaves, clear skies

I used a pigeon to get in touch with the Moon Prince. Very convenient—but also very inconvenient, considering they can only go one way. I need a pigeon resupply from the western capital before I run out of birds.

I've come quite a ways from the western capital now. Just a little farther, and it will be time to double back. I found a most interesting kind of wheat in this village. I noticed that one field in particular had yielded a remarkably large amount, and when I looked into it, I saw that the stalks were lower than most, so that fewer of them were knocked over. That seems to be why they yielded more than average. Maybe it's sheer coincidence that lower-growing wheat happened to proliferate here. I took seeds and some ears as an intriguing sample.

Deep green, cloudy skies

All right, I'm finally halfway there. When this is over, I'm going to get a wife, believe me.

There's something strange about the weather, though. It seems

very gloomy, even though it's not the rainy season. When I look up at the sky, I can see a dark cloud on the horizon, and hear a strange sound. The cloud seems to be coming closer. When I really squint, I see that the cloud is a huge swarm of insects. Oh no! They're here!

Plum rains, bug-filled skies

The locusts' assault continues no matter how many of them we kill. I released the last of my pigeons and told the young farmers who had come with me to head back to the western capital in a hurry.

Dammit! All I needed was another two weeks. The fields have been ravaged; there's no wheat now, just crushed insects. All our efforts are a drop in the ocean; we are so few against so many. The swarm of insects is enough to blot out the sky, and we can do almost nothing to stop it.

We'll all starve at this rate. We have to gather up every last scrap of wheat we can still find. We have to strip bark off the trees, pull grass out of the ground. Something, anything!

Plum rains, clear skies

I passed out the last of my white potatoes as provisions, and have chosen to dry my sweet potatoes.

With nothing to eat, the thieving has begun. Adult, child, doesn't matter. I have nothing left to distribute as food; the most I could do was to share a dried potato with a child who looked on the brink of starvation. My small act of decency.

Some heat, clear skies
Eeeeyaarrrrghhh!
I'm gonna be killed by bandits!
Ugh!
They stole all my cargo!

High summer, clear skies

I can finally see the western capital.

The closer I get, the more officials I find stationed at the nearby villages. The swarm has caused a stream of refugees from the west, and I'm treated as just another one of them.

Ugh, I feel disgusting. Can't bathe, can't even get a decent meal. When I catch my reflection in water, I see a dirty man, with an

unkempt beard and covered in dust. My small change and my dried potatoes are all gone, but I've managed to hold on to my seeds and my mung beans—I've guarded them with my life.

After being attacked by bandits and nearly taken for all my potatoes, can you blame me if I don't have much trust in people anymore? Then again, there are those who have done me a good turn.

I need to hurry back to the western capital so I can tell them what's going on.

Higher summer, clear skies

I finally made it to the western capital. I told them my name, but it didn't seem to mean anything to them. What's with that?

I'm sure it's not that my name isn't actually written down anywhere, right?

What should I do at a moment like this? Lahan isn't here, and it wouldn't be quite right to drop Maomao's name. My orders technically come from the Moon Prince. All right, it feels a little childish, but this is an emergency—I'll have them summon him for me. I need to yell at the top of my lungs or I won't get a reaction.

I tried yelling, and they threw me in some kind of jail cell.

Okay it is really hot now, clear skies

Thankfully, Maomao and the others came to get me, so I'm back in the mansion in the western capital.

The food problem is really serious. Things are going to turn ugly if people don't get enough to eat.

All I've been able to do for now is to cultivate some modest sustenance.

Early autumn, clear skies

Relief supplies arrived from the royal capital. I checked to see if they included any crops that looked like they might grow quickly, but there was nothing there. Most of it was cereals and medicine, but not nearly enough of either. We're getting more and more refugees.

Is there no way we can fill everyone's stomachs? I ponder the question as I feed locusts to the goats and duck, along with whatever meager grass is available.

Lingering heat, clear skies

I hear we're starting to see cases of malnutrition from lack of food. Maomao says people aren't getting enough vegetables.

Should I show her the bean sprouts I've quietly been growing?

She also asks me whether there's any way to grow medicinal herbs, but I think that's going to be a tall order in the western capital.

I wonder what it is about the medical profession that seems to attract so many weirdos. Not just the likes of Maomao or my great-uncle Luomen; there's also the little old man who's always inviting me to tea. He says he used to be a physician at the rear palace. He seems like a decent guy, though, so what's the harm?

Autumn heat, clear skies

Laaaaaahaaaaaannnn!

I'll kill that bastard!

What's he doing living with two eligible young ladies?!

Early autumn, clear skies

Lahan might have tricked me into coming to the western capital, but if nothing else, I have a front row seat to just how obnoxious politics can be. From what I can tell, the Moon Prince doesn't make a big deal of going about his work, but he really gets things done. He's trying to nip problems in the bud—but in terms of worldly fame, it's much easier for people to celebrate those who solve problems *after* they start instead of before. Some guys really know how to deal with things, huh?

Speaking of dealing with things, why am I in charge of these goats and this duck? Then again, if I don't protect them, Miss Chue is going to try to eat them. People are starving everywhere...

Fresh cool, clear skies

It *really* doesn't rain in the western capital. Trying to water things has been a huge headache. The rich folk around here have ponds as a sign of their ridiculous wealth, but they're probably made using underground water. At least that makes it easier to grow bean sprouts.

We've started fields near the western capital, but irrigation is proving to be the biggest challenge. Bringing up water from underground isn't realistic. It would be great if we could get water

from a river, but the scale of the project would be untenable. Maybe you just can't have farm fields if there isn't a body of water nearby.

As one learns if one is going in and out of the estate, the mood in town is getting worse and worse. Stomachs are empty and tempers are high, while all-out struggles for food are hardly unusual.

Some people are claiming the insects were some kind of curse from another country. It's just a natural disaster! How ridiculous can you be?

I really don't like the way things are looking out there.

Cool breeze, clear skies

It was bound to happen eventually, and it finally has.

A mob has closed in on the mansion where the Moon Prince is staying. What's going to happen here? I don't know.

I really don't know.

Autumn cool, clear skies

Now things make even less sense to me.

Gyoku-ou, the leader of the western capital, is dead.

What the heck is going on?

Autumn colors, clear skies

I'm just going to stop thinking about politics. It doesn't make any sense to me. I always thought of myself as reasonably smart, but I'm not made for this. I think I would die of an upset stomach. If Lahan were here, I'm sure he'd just roll with it and keep cranking out work. I'll never beat him in that regard.

With Gyoku-ou dead, things seem to have turned very serious. The mansion's servants can hardly bring themselves to do their jobs. But none of that has any bearing on field work. I've got to get out there again today and keep breaking ground.

Autumn clear, clear skies

The Moon Prince is relocating from the annex. It sounds like Maomao and the friendly old doctor are going with him, but I'd like to stay here for a while. This garden is finally hitting its stride. The groundskeeper may have it out for me, but we're closer to a water source here, and that makes growing easier.

Autumn beauty, clear skies

There's a beautiful greenhouse at the main house, where we're moving. I hear they used to grow cucumbers there, but they've already been cruelly uprooted.

Maomao could barely contain herself as she planted seeds for medicinal herbs, but the glare that the greenhouse's minder was giving her—well! If looks could kill.

I'm out of the loop on whatever happened, but even I could figure it out at a glance.

Colorful leaves, clear skies

I've turned the annex's entire garden into fields.

Next I'm starting on the ones at the main house. I'm not going about things like Maomao, though. I made sure to get permission from Miss Chue. Someone from the Gyoku clan, a guy named Hulan, gave his approval, too, so I should be in the clear.

The friendly old physician helps me out with farmwork when he has time to kill, but someone hurt his leg. Some firecracker of the Gyoku family gave it a whack—I think his name was Gyokujun. He sure liked to boss the servants around. Someone better set him straight while he can still change his ways, or who knows what will become of him?

The thought occurs to me: I could have been like him, if my mother and grandfather had had more influence on me. If Uncle Lakan hadn't snatched the family headship, I might have grown up as a selfish whelp of the La family.

Now instead of the physician, his bodyguard Lihaku is helping me. If we can hurry to get this field ready and lay down some shell ash, we might be able to plant some wheat, so we're working as hard as we can.

A gardener keeps giving me dirty looks, but I got permission. I'm not doing anything wrong.

Autumn chill, clear skies

I got a letter from my father asking if I've planted potatoes yet. Shut up! Yes, I've planted them. Lahan doesn't know what Dad is really like. I wonder if he's dealing with being in charge all right.

I hope Mom and Grandpa are doing well. They like to lord it over people, but they can be surprisingly fragile. I guess it goes to show what comes of having too much pride. I wonder if Grandpa

might have been a bit more upstanding if he hadn't been in the shade of a younger brother as thoroughly exceptional as my great-uncle Luomen.

As I was writing my reply, I saw Gyokujun bullying his cousin, a younger girl named Xiaohong. I went over to them and he scurried off someplace. Hmph! If he can't stand his ground, he should have left her alone to begin with.

Hey, goat! That's precious paper! Expensive stuff that the physician gave me. Don't eat it!

Late autumn, clear skies

Today I was working on the fields at the main house. I tried planting different seed stock in each area, all kinds of wheat. I'm curious how different the yields will be between the short wheat and the regular stuff given the same environment. But it's going to take six months or so to find out... Wait, how long do I plan to be here?! When do I get to go home?

With Lihaku and Hulan helping me, work went quickly. Hulan doesn't behave like the pampered son of a good household. He's more like an apprentice, trying out all kinds of different jobs. Well, it's certainly helpful for me. Any big brother with a younger sibling like him would be very happy.

I went to the medical office to grab a quick break, since I knew the friendly old physician would serve me tea. Recently, Uncle Lakan has been at a lot of our little tea parties. I assume he's there to see Maomao, but she can sense his presence and makes herself scarce. The old doctor seems a lot like Luomen somehow—he really seems to know how to handle my uncle. It really brings home how everyone has some special skill or redeeming quality.

Uncle Lakan wasn't there today, but there was some kid. A boy, probably twelve or thirteen years old—not even old enough to have had his coming-of-age ceremony. He's a quick thinker, so they value him for doing small chores. I've seen him around a few times, but I've never caught his name. He said he wanted to introduce himself to me. Ah, he really is a quick one, isn't he? But...hey, your name is Kan Junjie too, huh? Yes, a very common name; I hear it all the time, myself. Wow, so you're your family's oldest son? And your nickname is Haku'un? Makes sense; that's just the sort of thing you would call an eldest son. You know, I happen to be the oldest son of my own family.

What? You'll use a different name if there's someone else with the same name around? What? Who does that? I mean, no, you don't have to do that! Please don't look at me all resolved like that! I won't give you any grief just because of a shared name. Hey, wait! Heyyy...

I decided to tell him my name was Lahan's Brother.

Falling leaves, clear skies

There was some kind of commotion at the main house, but I'm busy. Harvesting my soybeans takes priority.

Autumn frost, clear skies

Uncle Lakan is here all the time trying to see Maomao, and it's obnoxious. I'm amazed the old doctor can stand entertaining him.

Miss Chue said Maomao had gone to the port town to do some shopping. That would make sense for a few days, but now it's been ten days since we saw her. For that matter, I don't see Miss Chue either. Plus, the mood at the main house seems pretty grim.

I'm sure something must have happened—but what good would it do for me to say anything? Maybe if I had the power or capacity, but I've never had much talent for those sorts of things, and sticking my nose in only seems likely to get me in trouble.

I think I'd gain more from thinking about what to do with the soy beans I've harvested. Should I just eat them? Process them somehow? Grow them into bean sprouts? There are so many things I could do.

Early winter, cloudy skies

Something's wrong with Uncle Lakan. I mean, something's always been wrong with him, but he's been acting especially strange lately. I finally found the Moon Prince, but for some reason my uncle was there too, berating Hulan. Hey... Uncle?! Why are you burning those papers?!

He's scary. In a totally different way from my dad or grandfather.

Heck, Hulan, it's just as scary how your expression never changes. Wait...what?! Why are you sitting down on the burning papers and bowing your head? Geez! Burns—you're gonna burn yourself!

Water! We need some water over here!

Twelfth month, clear skies

I gather that the reason Uncle Lakan was so angry at Hulan was because he did something to entrap Maomao. I can see why he would be upset. And to think, he's just an old guy who's normally no more than a bit of a nuisance as long as you don't antagonize him. Oh, and also, he's kind of a loser.

And Hulan—something's up with him too. Whatever motivates his behavior, it's beyond what I can comprehend. I guess he decided his own older brother was in the way of making the Moon Prince the leader of the western capital, so Hulan decided to eliminate him? I can't believe he plotted all that with that grin on his face. And here I thought he was just a nice guy helping with some chores. Well, I take it all back. I don't need a little brother like that. I'd even take Lahan over him!

Chill cold, clear skies

Maomao and the others are finally back, but Miss Chue is in bad shape.

What the hell happened? She can't even use her right arm anymore. It's a real tragedy.

Year-end, clear skies

Miss Chue has set up camp in the medical office on the grounds that she's a convalescent. I grant that her injuries are serious, but she's really just using that as cover to lounge around and do nothing. I feel bad for the friendly old doctor, who seems to spend all his time taking care of her.

I guess they're finally going to decide who gets to run the western capital. It won't be the Moon Prince, but apparently a man named Shikyou—Master Gyoku-ou's oldest son. He's also, incidentally, Hulan's older brother and the father of that obnoxious brat Gyokujun.

Are we really gonna be okay with this guy?

New spring, clear skies

I saw Xiaohong today. I thought Gyokujun was bullying her again, but on closer inspection, I saw Xiaohong do something very unexpected. She slapped Gyokujun, taunted him—practically spat on him—and then went off somewhere. There was nothing the boy

could do; he just burst into tears. That was when I realized his and Xiaohong's positions had been reversed completely.

There was one other person besides me who saw the scene: Maomao.

I just *know* she had something to do with this!

Early spring, clear skies

I headed off to the farming villages with one thought in mind: This year, I'm going to get them to grow some decent wheat! I'll see to it that they tread the crop and till the soil. It's not going to be a repeat of last year—there won't be any lackadaisical growing practices on my watch!

Things seem pretty busy at the main house too. Probably something to do with the new year. There's no end of work for politicians. But that's no concern of mine. I've got farming to do.

Cold afoot, cloudy skies

When I got back to the mansion in the western capital, there was nobody there.

Just a second—what's going on here?! Somebody? Anybody?!

Moon Prince! Maomao! Miss Chue! Friendly old doctor! Lihaku! Uncle Lakan!

What in the world is this?!

Don't leave me heeeeeere!

○●○

The thick stack of papers turned out to be somebody's diary. One of the people from the central region must have forgotten it when he went back home. It was discovered at the inn town, at the inn where its author had supposedly waited for his ship.

A great many names appeared in the diary—but of the name of its author there was no sign. Nobody knew whom to return it to. However, from the extensive notes on farming methods and cultivation, the writer was obviously a professional farmer.

Further, if the contents of the book were to be believed, this person was also quite important within the court hierarchy—important enough that he could directly summon a member of the royal family.

However, when the owner of the inn sent the diary to the

capital, he was informed that there were no farming specialists among the ranks of the most important bureaucrats. There *had* been such a person at one point, but he had long ago returned to the royal capital, and there was no way he would have forgotten his diary at the inn town.

At a loss for what else to do, the innkeeper left the book with the gardeners, men who trod the wheat of their gardens with dead looks in their eyes. Strangely, the gardens of the western leader, once regarded as the finest in I-sei Province, had been turned into wheat fields for some reason.

Later, the diary would be edited into a manual of farming techniques, but its author remained unknown.

The gardeners passed the book among themselves and laughed, their small measure of revenge against the interlopers from the central region at whose hands their gardens had suffered so much; but eventually the eye of some scholar lighted upon the diary, and this is the result.

Chapter 9: En'en's Day Off

The doctors, as a rule, got one day off every ten, although that could slide a little depending on whether it was the busy season or not. It was the same for En'en and the other medical assistants.

However, there was a problem with this system—for En'en, a very serious one.

"Why is it that my mistress is working today and I'm not?!"

"It's a rotating system. That's how it works," Maomao said, already tired of this conversation.

"But I would *happily* go to work today!"

"Dr. You said no. I think that's the end of the matter."

"Whose side are you on, Maomao?"

"You just get so fired up whenever Yao is involved in anything, En'en. Anyway, why did you call me here? Was it just so you could complain?" Maomao gave En'en an unimpressed look.

They were in the annex at Lahan's home—in the room that Yao and En'en were currently borrowing. En'en had called Maomao here since they happened to have the same day off. Or, more precisely, En'en had dragged Maomao out of the dormitory first thing in the morning.

"I'm not eager to be in this house any longer than I have to be," Maomao informed her. "Also, I have business to take care of this afternoon, so I'll be leaving before then."

Maomao did not look comfortable here. She was Lakan's illegitimate daughter, but she herself didn't seem to want to admit it. She received no end of letters urging her to come visit, but she always ignored them and frequently used them for kindling in the oven.

"Oh, don't worry. Master Lakan has a conference this morning that he can't get out of. His aides are going to drag him there by hook or by crook, so we won't see him again until this evening."

"Why are you so familiar with that freak's schedule?"

"Because I've established decent relationships with the servants around here."

Otherwise, she and Yao would have been chased out of the estate long ago.

Maomao nibbled on a tea-flavored rice cracker, annoyed. En'en knew that Maomao liked salty things better than sweets, and enjoyed a good crunch. Similarly, she didn't like refined, expensive tea leaves as much as commoner's tea with its inconsistent and unpredictable flavor.

En'en further knew that Maomao didn't eat as much as most people, but she was particular about taste.

"So if it wasn't just to complain, why did you call me here?" Maomao asked, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs. If she'd done that in front of Yao, Maomao knew En'en would have had some stern words for her, but since her "mistress" was absent today, Maomao would take the liberty of sitting how she pleased. It was the least she could ask, having allowed En'en to drag her out here.

"I know you've got a sharp intuition, Maomao. I'll bet you can guess."

"Well, you specifically brought me here when Yao isn't around, so I assume it has to do with her. And I assume it has to do with the fact that you cleared out of the dorms and came to live in this freak's house."

"You're just as perceptive as I'd hoped." En'en took a sip of tea. It was surprisingly good for the price, and she'd steeped it gently so it was fragrant. "I want you to save my mistress from the evil hand of Master Lahan!"

Maomao didn't say anything; instead she scowled, and then her mouth fell open.

"What kind of look is that?" En'en asked.

"Oh, it's nothing..."

That look was definitely something, but En'en knew it wouldn't be any use pressing the point. Part of being a grown-up was choosing not to pursue something you already understood.

"My point is, my mistress is still so young. I'm sure Master Lahan must be leading her on somehow."

"Oh... Yeah."

"What's with the distant look in your eyes?!"

"There's no distant look in my eyes," Maomao said, but she didn't sound very convincing. There was no emotion in her tone.

"If you say so," En'en grumbled. Maomao might not be very interested in the subject, but as Lahan's little sister, En'en thought she ought to take some responsibility.

En'en had regrets: She'd been sure that Lahan was only interested in older widows. He was tousle-haired and had fox-like eyes; it wasn't that he was unbearable to look at, but it was hard to call him handsome. Above all, he was *shorter* than Yao.

"That's not very nice to say...even if it is true," Maomao said. Apparently the voice of En'en's heart had slipped out and reached her.

"What does my mistress see in a man like him?!"

"I see. It's Yao who wants to stay here, and is inventing reasons not to leave. You, En'en, would love to get out of here and put some distance between you and Lahan, but you can't go against your precious Yao—which is why you want me to do something."

"Well, yes!"

Maomao's face made it clear that she did not think much of this idea. Then again, that was how she looked about most ideas.

"My mistress is so young still. I'm sure she's just confused!"

"Oh, no doubt."

"Otherwise, such a shrimpy, tousle-haired, fox-eyed little man would never..."

"You're saying it out loud again."

En'en clenched her fist. Maomao seemed to have some sort of thoughts on the matter. "What is it? You have a problem?" En'en

asked.

"No. Confused Yao might be, but I've started to realize that she's not the kind to be too concerned about outward appearances."

"Of course not—she's my mistress! She would never be so shallow as to judge people on their looks!"

Maomao didn't say anything, but gave En'en a skeptical look.

"What? Why are you staring at me?" said En'en.

"Oh, it's nothing. That would imply, however, that Yao is seeing what's inside Lahan, and that's what's causing this 'confusion.'"

"N-No, that..."

That couldn't possibly happen—or so En'en wanted to believe.

"What's inside Lahan is trash," Maomao said in annoyance, "and I have to admit I don't know what she could see in him either."

"I know, right?! I agree completely. He's the most awful person—he tried to chase us out of his house because he claimed it wasn't good for two unmarried young women to be living here!"

"But you don't *want* to stay here, do you? You *want* to get out of here in a hurry, right? And that's what you're asking me about, *isn't* it?" Maomao said, oddly emphasizing certain words. En'en found it distinctly annoying.

"Maomao. Seriously, what's with the look?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking, when it comes to your young mistress, you won't let a little logical inconsistency stop you."

"Why should I? The world revolves around my mistress! Everything and everyone in the world revolves around her, the way the heavens turn around the seven stars in the sky!" En'en thrust her hands upward as she spoke.

"En'en, please don't say things like that at court. You're going to get us executed for disrespect."

This despite the fact that, in En'en's opinion, Maomao was far more disrespectful than she ever was.

"Huh. What's inside Lahan, huh... I have to say, I don't think much of the way he's constantly appraising everyone he meets." Maomao was still munching away on the rice crackers. En'en was an adult, so the rejoinder *Aren't you exactly the same, Maomao?* never made it past her throat.

"I do wonder what Yao would be drawn to in him," Maomao went on.

“That’s what I’d like to know! Can’t you think of anything, Maomao?”

“This is just imagination on my part, but I think Lahan has a clear grasp of general standards, as well as a very firm idea of his own preferences. Maybe Yao, who’s never been a fan of stereotypical ‘woman’s happiness,’ finds that novel and exciting.”

“So he’s got his own unique standards? I guess I could understand, in that he doesn’t look at gender differences but purely at practical ability. I guess the La clan is full of people like that, folks like you and Master Lakan.”

Maomao bristled. “I am *not* like that, and would you kindly not speak that freak’s name in front of me?”

“Surely I can at least say his name.”

“Don’t you feel like if you say it, he might suddenly appear behind you?”

“Okay, yeah, I can see that.”

En’en had experienced it more than once herself: When there was talk that Lakan found interesting, he would just suddenly show up.

“So he judges people by their abilities, without considering whether they’re supposedly important, or their length of service, or even whether they’re male or female. In a way, you could say he’s almost Yao’s ideal man,” said Maomao.

“I—Ideal?! Absolutely not!” En’en said, veritably shaking as she rebuffed the idea. “There are lots of fine gentlemen so much more suited to my mistress! To suggest that Master Lakan is her *ideal*...”

“That’s not the ideal I’m talking about. But anyway, does this mean that you do have it in mind to see Yao married, En’en?”

“Yes, she should have a husband. As long as he meets my standards.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen in this lifetime,” Maomao said. She looked exasperated and gave a very theatrical sigh.

“It could too!”

En’en was about to detail to Maomao her ideal husband for Yao when there was a knock at the door.

“Yes? Who is it?” En’en asked. Maomao hid in the shadows, alert to the possibility that it might be Lakan.

“Please pardon me,” said a voice. It wasn’t Lakan, but a boy whose voice had yet to change.

Sifan, the fourth child, entered the room. He was one of the

kids who worked at Lakan's estate, and he was very clever. Lahan didn't accept rent, so En'en gave money to Sifan instead. There was no risk of him embezzling—he knew it would be idiotic to try to skim some off the top. Lakan would find out and chase him out of the house.

"What do you need?" En'en asked. "I've got company."

"I'm sorry; I realize that. However, I thought a moment when Lady Yao was out of the house would be a good time to speak to you."

"It has to be when my mistress is away? What do you mean?"

"Sanfan wishes to meet with you, Lady En'en."

En'en swallowed heavily. "All right."

"Well, it looks like you've got things to do." Maomao, sensing the perfect opportunity to escape, grabbed one more rice cracker.

En'en clutched her wrist. "Come with me, won't you, Maomao?"

"I couldn't. I'd only be a third wheel."

"Sanfan said it would be no problem. In fact, she says she's tried to summon you repeatedly by letter," said Sifan. Maomao looked away pointedly.

"Please tell her that En'en and Maomao will *both* come to see her." En'en smiled sweetly, while Maomao drew her lips back in a grimace.

Chapter 10: En'en and the Love Chat

Maomao and En'en were shown to Sanfan's room, which was quite large for a servant's quarters. As far as En'en could tell, in Lakan's household there were ordinary servants and not-so-ordinary servants. The ordinary servants were mostly people who had been brought in by Lahan. The not-so-ordinary ones were the people Lakan himself had accumulated from here, there, and everywhere.

The man known as the Strategist was perfectly average in terms of his looks and physical abilities—perhaps even a bit below average, it was safe to say. He was of medium height and build, had eyes like a fox's, and an unpleasant grin. The only really distinctive thing about him was the foreign monocle that he wore. Officially he was a soldier, but he lacked any muscle to speak of. Nor did he have any stamina. He couldn't hold his liquor, and he could barely survive a trip on any kind of moving vehicle. Apparently he had spent time in I-sei Province long ago, and he could at least ride a horse. He seemed every inch a useless lout who'd gotten his position purely thanks to his bloodline.

At least, that was what people had thought of him until a little over ten years ago. Then, for some reason, Lakan had wrested the family headship from his father to become the leader of the La clan. After that, opinions of him changed completely.

Lakan himself, when alone, was an inveterate dullard—but he absolutely excelled at making use of other people. Nobody was a better overseer of people then he was.

Lakan could see a person's particular qualities and talents at a glance, and somehow he was also able to see straight through people's lies. He would draw out those who were not blessed with excellent superiors and curry favor with them, while hostile forces he would destroy from within. Those who opposed him found themselves exiled if they were lucky, and executed if they weren't.

At present, there was no one in the court who dared to stand against him.

The servants brought in by such a man were never going to be

completely ordinary—and Sanfan, who had joined Lakan about five years ago now, was one of them. She was a little short for a man, but a bit tall for a woman—about the same height as Yao. She was a woman, but typically wore male attire.

"Lady Maomao, En'en. You must excuse me for summoning you," Sanfan said, the slightest of smiles on her handsome face.

"What do you want with us?" Maomao asked, and she sounded very annoyed.

"I simply wanted to welcome our honored guests and—"

"We can do without the playacting. Could you do us a favor and get to the point?" En'en broke in, cutting to the chase. Maomao nodded vigorously; she had been about to say the same thing.

Cleverly, Sanfan had put out tea and rice crackers—she, too, knew Maomao's preferences, it seemed.

"Very well. Let me be direct." Sanfan looked at En'en. "This is about your Yao."

"'My Yao'? Well, aren't we feeling very familiar?" En'en wasn't about to put up with hearing Sanfan refer to Yao like that.

"Are you suggesting that because she's Vice Minister Lu's niece, I should refer to her as 'the young mistress'? From my investigations, I'm aware that Yao shuns her uncle's reflected glory. Taken purely on her own terms, she's just another lady of the court, isn't she? Is she so distinguished that I should afford her a title of honor?"

That slight smile played across Sanfan's face again, but it didn't reach her eyes. No matter how you sliced them, those were fighting words.

Just as En'en had looked into Sanfan, Sanfan had done the same for En'en and Yao. She must have researched Maomao's background as well, because the tea snacks were crunchy, salty rice crackers, exactly the kind Maomao liked. She munched happily on them.

"Are you trying to start something?" En'en demanded.

"Nothing of the sort. I only called you here because I thought talking might be to our mutual benefit."

"And how is that?"

"It's *your* mutual benefit, so this doesn't involve me, right? Can I go home?" Maomao asked, looking for any excuse to get out of there, but En'en grabbed her wrist again.

"Sanfan. What is this mutual benefit, exactly?"

"I'm glad you asked. It's my opinion that nobody stands to gain

from you and Yao staying at this house any longer. I urge you to go somewhere else—and as it happens, I've found the perfect place. My understanding is that you've long since vacated your dormitory, is that correct?"

Sanfan took out a piece of paper on which blueprints were drawn. The place was bigger than the room En'en and Yao occupied now; there were more ovens in the kitchen, and a well nearby.

"This residence is in a nice, safe area near the market. It's close to your place of employment, and believe it or not, the rent is only __"

The number of fingers she held up certainly represented an excellent deal. It wasn't En'en but Maomao whose eyes started to shine and whose fingers flexed excitedly. "Think of the medicines I could make with all that space..." (The dormitory was not suited to the processing of medicinal herbs.)

"I grant it seems like a good place," En'en said.

"Doesn't it, though? How about it? You could move in immediately."

"Much as I'd love to jump at the chance, I have a question. What's so bad about us staying right where we are?"

"Well, aren't we suspicious? I'm only suggesting that people may look askance at a young lady of fine breeding taking up residence in a man's house for so long."

"I take your point. Coming from anyone else, I would assume you suggested this idea out of concern for Lady Yao." En'en stared hard at Sanfan.

Maomao frowned, her brow knitting, and she nudged her companion. "En'en," she whispered.

"Yes, Maomao? What is it?" En'en whispered back.

"Maybe you should just go ahead and take her suggestion. It *is* an excellent place. I don't think she's trying to con you. What don't you like about it?"

"What don't I like? Why don't we start with the distinct sense that Sanfan looks down on my mistress?"

Sanfan certainly felt no special affection for Yao; that much was obvious in her attitude, and En'en didn't like it.

"Oh, please. You're imagining things," said Maomao, hoping to coax En'en into taking the deal so she could go home already.

"I am most certainly not," En'en said, and now she looked directly at Sanfan. "As I said, Sanfan, I agree that it's a good offer,

but is it made out of concern for Lady Yao?"

Sanfan answered with a wide grin, "No. It's made out of concern for Master Lahan."

"Master Lahan?" En'en said. She'd known perfectly well that Sanfan hadn't been thinking about Yao, but hearing it put so starkly left her at a bit of a loss for how to respond.

En'en considered the situation: True, from her perspective, Sanfan's suggestion wasn't a bad one. But it came with a distinct lack of respect for Yao. What did that represent?

Sanfan said, "To be quite honest, I'd be curious to know how a young woman of marriageable age justifies moving into a young man's house, no matter how much she may resent her uncle's attempts to arrange a match. Particularly considering that that meddlesome uncle is currently far away to the west, with no indication of when he will return. I simply don't know where she finds the nerve to stick around."

Just as En'en began to really bristle, Maomao nudged her again. "En'en, is it possible that you actually agree with Sanfan's suggestion as such, but because it comes from Sanfan, you can't bring yourself to simply say yes?"

"No. Nothing of the sort," En'en said—but it took her a long moment to say it. Maomao could be remarkably perceptive about what other people were thinking and feeling. En'en just wished she would have picked a different time to activate that ability. Where was it when En'en needed it?

"You're frowning very, very hard right now, En'en. And your face is twitching." Maomao was giving En'en a scowl of her own.

"You're imagining things," En'en said. "I don't have any particular objections to her idea."

"Then hurry up and say yes. Not to mention, that'll solve the problem you were asking me about."

She was right—but it didn't *feel* right.

"Hrm... I'd have to ask my mistress what she thinks," said En'en. There was no telling how Yao might react if she learned En'en had summarily moved them out of the mansion. She might not speak to her for three days.

"At the end of the day, Yao really has you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?" Maomao grumbled.

"Are you done with your little huddle?" Sanfan asked.

"I can't say yes or no to moving out until I've consulted with

my mistress," En'en informed her.

"No?" Sanfan tilted her head, puzzled. "Here I thought I'd found an offer that fit all the conditions for your ideal place you described to Sifan and the others."

En'en was getting angry at the sense that Sanfan was controlling this conversation. "Let me ask you something, then," she said. "Why are you so eager to get us, and especially my young mistress Yao, out of this house? Perhaps you would be so kind as to enlighten me?"

En'en was feeling petty; she thought Sanfan was hiding something and wanted to see her squirm a bit.

Sanfan's expression never shifted, however, as she declared, "I am deeply in love with Master Lahan. I would and will do anything for him. So when some misguided, wet-behind-the-ears little girl shows up and tries to make herself his wife just by moving in, what can I call her but a hindrance?"

"Who's a wet-behind-the-ears little—" En'en was leaning forward when it happened.

"*Pbbbbbt!*"

The glittering wad of spit came from Maomao. It was filthy, and En'en unconsciously took a half step back.

"Pardon me very much," Maomao said.

"Not at all..." Tea and bits of rice cracker clung to Sanfan's face.

"Sanfan, are you insane?" Maomao asked.

"And what would cause you to question my sanity?" she replied, dabbing at her cheek with a handkerchief.

"Tousle-glasses, that's what! He only ever thinks about making money, he never lets a relationship go too far, and speaking of women, he's specifically said that he thinks widows are perfect—like the piece of trash that he is. He's got completely average looks, but if the numbers were lovely enough, he'd be asking whether he could have a child with another man. And on top of all that, anyone who *did* marry him, I guarantee, would find that freak strategist came with him!"

Maomao's analysis was accurate, if rather cruel.

"I know all that. I also know that he'll cut loose anyone and everyone he must to achieve his goals, and that when it comes to those he doesn't get along with, he'll make sure they find themselves between a rock and a hard place without ever getting his own hands dirty or leaving any evidence. I know his athletic

abilities are abysmal, that he can't ride a horse or shoot an arrow. He's all brains and no...anything else."

Maomao threw her hands in the air, disbelieving. "Then you see what a worthless guy he is!" Her reaction was so over-the-top that En'en's fury at Yao being called a little girl seemed slightly less absurd in comparison.

It was then that Sanfan blushed, just faintly. "I realize that Master Lahan may not appear to be such a wonderful person, but nonetheless, he was the one who gave me the opportunity to live like myself. He doesn't twist his thinking just because something is beautiful."

With apologies to Sanfan, who was clearly in the flush of maidenly love, En'en couldn't bring herself to think well of Lahan.

Maomao, feeling like she wanted to throw up, gave Sanfan a very serious look. "However highly you may esteem Lahan, Sanfan, he's a piece of trash. My guess is that just when you think you've both had fun and it's time to seal the deal, he'll suddenly marry the young daughter of some fine family, as if all your flirting together meant nothing to him. Then he'll at least *pretend* to create a perfectly decent family. That guy is no good, I'm telling you. Most of all, I think you would find it hard to become the mistress of this household in your current situation. Remember, you'd be a daughter-in-law to...*you know*! You understand? A sweet-toothed freak of an old man would be part of the deal, no question."

Maomao was merciless, but when one got right down to it, what she was saying was indeed very true.

"I'm more than aware of that, believe me. And they may call me Number Three, but I would be perfectly happy to be Master Lahan's number two. However, I would want the future mistress of this household to be someone I wanted to support."

At that, En'en and Maomao were both struck dumb; they shared a look. Sanfan was further gone than they had thought. Did Lahan realize he had allowed a woman of such dangerous ideals so close at hand?

"Come on, just call it quits! There are *so* many men out there who are much, much better than Lahan!"

"I'm afraid, Lady Maomao, that there aren't that many who are willing to think like he does."

"Sanfan, you may not match my Mistress Yao, but you're very capable. You've just got tunnel vision right now. Try to be

rational!"

"Any man who would choose a woman on such narrow-minded criteria as whether she's *capable* is a man I'm not interested in to begin with."

"I'm telling you, that guy is definitely all about looks. He can say what he wants about numbers, but he loves a pretty face! You've got to face reality!" Maomao shook Sanfan by the shoulders.

En'en could at least halfway understand Maomao's feelings. Why that bespectacled loser should be so popular with the ladies, she couldn't begin to guess. Some men just seemed to attract women, even when you would think they wouldn't. Perhaps Lahan had simply been born under such a star.

That was bad: She wanted to hurry and get out of such a dangerous man's house. Much as she resented it, En'en found herself thinking that maybe she should take Sanfan up on her offer and move out of here. If there was a one in a million, or even a one in ten million, chance that the unthinkable might happen, what would she do?

If Yao really were in love with Lahan...

"Argh! No no no no no!"

"En'en, you're looking very out of character," Maomao jibed, but En'en didn't have time to find the perfect retort. The fear of that which must never be was growing steadily within her—and the problem didn't seem likely to be solved for some time.

En'en spent the rest of her day off worrying, with no relief in sight.

Chapter 11: A Flower Called Joka

Joka, facing a pile of books, recited the words of the venerated text as if she were singing. It might be called reading aloud, except she never opened a book. She knew the Four Books and Five Classics by heart, every one. If someone named one of the books and a page, she could recite it from memory.

"No matter how many times I hear you, it's always wonderful," said tonight's customer, applauding. He was an older man, a scholar and a regular client of Joka's. She called him "*Laoshi*," Teacher.

Did scholarship pay so well that such a man could spend all his time at a brothel? No, no it did not. In fact, Laoshi spent what money he had on collecting all manner of books. Maybe that was why, despite being old enough that he could easily have had grandchildren or great-grandchildren, he didn't even have a wife.

So what was this spendthrift academic doing as a regular client of one of the Three Princesses of the Verdigris House? The boy sitting behind him had something to do with that. He was a few years past his coming-of-age ceremony, probably not even twenty yet. He didn't even have a beard.

"I hope you're listening. If Joka says you know what you're doing, you'll have no trouble passing the civil service examination."

This customer was a teacher as well as a scholar, and a number of his pupils had passed the civil service exam. Joka, a courtesan who nonetheless knew all nine classics by heart, was much in demand among those seeking to sit the examinations. Come exam season, would-be test takers lined up outside the Verdigris House. It was something of a good-luck charm: Rumor had it that if Joka acknowledged your skills, you were sure to pass.

It was said that passing the civil service examination would see your family living in ease for three generations, so parents spared no expense in educating their children. The stories about Joka might be rumor or superstition, but still people would spend on her.

And thus this old man came to drink wine on the coin of parents investing in their sons' futures. The Verdigris House was not

interested in visitors without an introduction, so the hopeful test takers would ask Laoshi to help them meet Joka.

Joka was a courtesan, yes, but she was a world apart from her cheaper counterparts. She sold not her body but her talents. Courtesans who sold their favors were consumables—through repeated illnesses and abortions their bodies would weaken until they were too frail to take customers, whereupon they would no longer be able to eat and they would die.

The woman who had borne Joka had been such a woman of mean talents. Beautiful looks were all she'd had to offer, and she'd been too sure that her youth would never fade. As a result, she'd been taken in by some playboy who'd gotten her pregnant, and she had died cursing his name.

The pleasure district was full of such foolish ladies. Like Joka's "older sister," the woman who had given birth to Maomao.

Joka had no gift for dancing, nor any special talent for board games. But she did read books—the big, hulking ones that drove other people away. She would read them until her eyes were bloodshot, learning every word by heart. It was all she could do. She didn't have the gift of the gab and hated men, so instead she polished her one distinctive skill.

"That's really something. I've only learned half that text so far," the youngster said.

Half? With those rosy cheeks of his, how come he hadn't learned the whole thing yet? If he had time to ooh and ahh over her accomplishments, he should spend it poring over the books lying in front of them. They had proper lamps here; he wouldn't even have to study by firefly light or the moon reflected off the snow. He could read to his heart's content.

"I'm taking the test this first time as sort of a practice run. Then I'll pass it the next time," he said.

He was planning to pass on the second try? He wasn't taking this seriously. If you didn't go in resolved to pass the first time, then the second and the third would be no different.

Joka restricted herself to answering the questions she was asked. The young test taker, still not accustomed to being around women, looked at her hungrily, his cheeks flushing. Joka let him look, contributing calmly and politely to the conversation, and gradually he became more talkative, drunk on the wine and on her.

The drunkenness brought out the bravado; he boasted to her of

how he had been called a child prodigy, how even if he couldn't expect to pass the test on the first try, he would absolutely do so the second time around.

He wanted to show her his best side, and that was all well and good, but Joka had seen any number of self-proclaimed child prodigies.

Laoshi let all this go on, enjoying the drinks. No wine tasted as good as free wine.

"Sir, time is up," an apprentice advised them. The incense stick that measured their meetings must have burned all the way down.

"Aw, and just when the conversation was really getting going," the boy said.

"Yes, sir. We have a carriage outside for you. Please watch your step on your way out. Oops! The wine has you swaying."

Laoshi sent the boy on ahead. His student took a last wistful glance at the room as he went.

"So, what do you think of him?" Laoshi asked Joka.

"Hopeless," she replied. "Someone so cocky but with so little stomach for this endeavor is never going to survive several days holed up in a cave writing essays."

"Merciless, as always, I see. Just imagine how I feel—I'm the one trying to whip him into shape!" Laoshi's distinctive long eyelashes drooped.

"Then I suggest buying him some stomach medication. Otherwise his nerves are likely to drive him to try to use the bathroom during the test, after which he'll be suspected of cheating and beaten."

The civil service exams were the gate that led to the bureaucracy, so there were many who would stop at nothing to pass them. As such, penalties for cheating were harsh, up to and including execution in particularly bad cases.

"Mmm. Yes, I think you're right," Laoshi said, stroking his beard.

"The way he looks, I think he would need at least twenty years of study to have any hope of passing."

The average age of those who passed the civil service examination was somewhere in their thirties. The test really wasn't something that could be accomplished in one or two lackadaisical attempts.

"Well, I suppose I'll buy that stomach medication and then head

on home," Laoshi said.

The Verdigris House had its own apothecary shop. It used to be run by Luomen and Maomao, but now Maomao's apprentice, a man named Sazen or something, was looking after the place. He probably had stomach medication available.

"G'bye, then. I'll be back," said Laoshi.

"And I'll be waiting for you," Joka replied. In reality, she didn't care if she never saw him again. She simply knew that if she didn't put on a show of being hospitable and courteous, the old madam who ran the place would make her pay for it.

With her customers gone, Joka tossed herself spread-eagle on her bed. Her clients never slept in this bed. Joka was not a foolish woman.

And yet, whatever airs and graces she might put on, a courtesan was a courtesan. Joka was pushing thirty. She had to decide what to do about her future before her customers started to dwindle.

Joka despised men, and being bought out of her contract was out of the question to her. She would rather wither on the vine like the madam.

"Ugh. So tired." She flopped back and forth on her bed.

One of the apprentices came in. "Sister Joka?"

"What? I'm supposed to be done for the night, aren't I?"

"Yes, but, well...there's one more person to see you."

"Excuse me?" Joka sat up, thoroughly displeased, and straightened her robes. "Who the hell is it?"

She wanted to simply say that she was done for the night and let that be the end of the matter, but she could see the madam in the hallway, and she was positively beaming. That meant the newcomer was loaded.

"Joka! You've got a customer. You'll be so kind as to see him, won't you?" The madam sounded like a mewling kitten; it made Joka sick. How much money had he plied her with to get her to purr like that?

"Hullo, Joka!"

Before her appeared a young bureaucrat who showed up once every six months or so. He was slim and wispy; Joka secretly referred to him as "Willow Boy." Behind him was another man, probably some friend of his. The friend, in distinct counterpoint to Willow Boy, was built like a chopped log.

Willow Boy's family was very well-to-do, but he himself showed

little appetite for rising in the world. He was one of those clients with, let's say, unusual tastes—he seemed to enjoy Joka's dismissive treatment of him. Every time he visited he constantly begged her to step on him; it annoyed her no end.

"It's been too long," she said—once again, only for form's sake. Her heart might not be in it, but her act was flawless, so that even the madam couldn't complain. It was a skill she had learned in order to continue doing work she didn't want to do, but on Willow Boy it had the opposite effect.

"Ooh, I like that. That look in your eyes!" He turned a smitten look of his own on her, giving her goosebumps. She knew he wouldn't try to force them to be closer than they were, but nonetheless it was exhausting to deal with him.

"Is something the matter? Normally you send a letter before you visit," Joka said, her indirect way of telling him to make a damn appointment.

"Ah, my friend here was so insistent we should come today." He turned to Log Boy. "This is her! This is the famous Joka of the Verdigris House!"

"Hoh! You're every bit as beautiful as I would expect of one of the most storied residents of such a famous house. Your lustrous black hair is particularly stunning," said Log Boy. Joka had heard it all before. She tried to remember when she had become "one of the most storied residents" of the Verdigris House. It was years ago now that the "Three Princesses" had been at their height, and Joka was now old enough to think about retirement.

She had not, however, fallen so far as to actually speak to someone she was meeting for the first time.

Instead she simply bowed.

"May I not even hear your voice?" Log Boy asked.

"Ha ha ha! You think it's that easy to get her to talk to you? She didn't even pour me a cup of wine until my fifth visit!" Willow Boy crowed. The reason she hadn't served him was because she hadn't wanted him to come back. His long, lecherous looks made her sick. It was only on his fifth visit that she had finally given up and accepted that he wasn't going away, so she might as well squeeze some money out of him.

"May I ask what brings you here today? Shall I recite a poem?"

"Ah, fair question. Actually, this is the guest of honor today." Willow Boy indicated Log Boy with a glance. "His name's Fang, and

he was absolutely desperate to meet you. Wouldn't leave me alone until I brought him along."

"My sincere apologies. He's a first-time visitor, is he not?" Joka asked. Again, a euphemism, meaning: She wasn't about to entertain any random newcomer.

"Oh, don't say that. The drinks are on me today!"

A bold proclamation from this young leech, Joka thought, but it helped her understand how this had happened. The old madam was glowering at her from the hallway. She was obviously telling Joka that the boy had coughed up enough to entitle him to an audience.

Really, how much *had* he given her?

"So you intend to take the civil service examination?" Joka asked.

"Hell no. Do I look like the test-taking type to you?" Log Boy replied. True, he was built more like a soldier than a bureaucrat. The kind who might be up for the military service exam, but not the civil service.

Log Boy kicked back in a chair and poured himself a drink.

"C'mon, geez," Willow Boy grumbled, but then he turned to Joka. "Say, uh, Joka. That *ka* in your name—it wouldn't mean you're related to the Imperial family by any chance, would it?"

Ah. So that was what they were here about.

"Who can say?" Joka replied. "Surely a woman descended from such an august lineage wouldn't have to scrounge her living as a flower of the night?"

Joka had adopted her name as a strike against the foolish woman. Only members of the royal family were permitted to use the character *ka*, which meant "flower"; for a courtesan to use it was a risky move but it also got people talking. It seemed particularly suited to the cold, brusque Joka.

"I can tell you it's not completely impossible," Log Boy said. "As a matter of fact, there's a girl working at court right now who's supposedly the offspring of some high official and a prostitute."

"Oh yeah, yeah. I heard the same thing," Willow Boy said.

Joka, for her part, didn't say anything. What was this lummox getting at? Joka had every suspicion that the young woman working in the palace was Maomao. Was he trying to find out about her?

One couldn't seal the lips of others. The fact that the story had reached even Willow Boy's ears was evidence that it was useless to

try to stop it now. Nonetheless, Joka had no intention of selling out the young woman who was effectively her little sister. Instead of trying to play dumb, she decided to change the subject.

"My mother told me, you see, that my father was a man of high stature," she said.

Joka thought of neither the woman who bore her nor the man who had planted the seed as her parents. She only referred to them as her mother and father to make things easier for her patrons to follow.

Joka stood and went over to her desk. She opened a locked drawer and took out a wooden box.

"What's that?" asked Log Boy.

It was a trick box that another customer had given her. It was an interesting little device: It could be opened by sliding aside a part of the box.

Inside was something wrapped in cloth. Joka unwrapped it to reveal a jade tablet, cracked in half. The surface of the tablet had been scraped away long ago, so whatever had once been written on it was no longer legible. Just the same, it was clear that the tablet was made of *rokan* jade, the highest-quality stone among green jades.

"You see this? A bit of old junk, yet my mother treated it like a treasure," Joka said.

As far as she was concerned, she could have thrown it away without a second thought. But it was the perfect tool for getting her name out there, a conversation piece that looked very significant and got customers talking.

"Why not use that tablet to declare yourself your father's daughter?" Log Boy asked her.

"Whatever this tablet once said is long gone now. And worse, it's cracked in half. My mother could have stolen it, for all I know," Joka said dismissively.

She had to keep her origins artfully ambiguous. Playing at having noble parentage was all well and good so long as it merely stirred up rumors, but she couldn't have anyone taking the idea too seriously. If the madam ever caught a whiff of the slightest possible trouble with lèse-majesté, she would cut Joka loose in an instant.

Truth be told, Joka didn't believe for a moment that she had Imperial blood in her veins. She'd heard about the man who had evidently planted the seed of her from one of the old courtesans.

He'd been handsome enough, the woman said, but reeked like an animal and had rough, knobbly hands.

Apparently, after several visits to the Verdigris House, he had stopped coming. Joka would sooner have believed he was a bandit than a nobleman. The Verdigris House was picky about its clientele, but that chiefly manifested as an interest in how much money they could spend.

Joka suspected it had gone something like this: The man had stolen the jade somewhere and was hoping to sell it, but it could too easily be traced. The jade itself was still of excellent quality, however, so he'd scraped off the front and broken it in half. Still people had been leery of it and he wasn't able to find a buyer—so he gave it to some idiot courtesan he was romancing.

Some customers were disappointed to find out she was simply a thief's daughter, while others insisted that no, the story about the noble connection might still be true.

Which kind, she wondered, would these men be?

"It doesn't matter to me who your parents were. You're still you, Joka," Willow Boy said, looking at her with passion in his eyes —not that she cared.

Joka put the broken jade back in its box; it had played its part. "I'm only sorry to disappoint you," she said.

"No disappointment at all," the man called Fang said. "But would you consider selling that tablet to me?"

Of all things she'd thought he might say, she hadn't expected that.

"As you can see, it's only a broken, shaved-down piece of stone. It has no value," Joka replied.

"That's perfectly fine. The romance of it is what interests me. The story!"

Joka had no special attachment to the tablet as such—but that didn't mean she was prepared to part with it at a mere suggestion. Giving it up would mean losing the air of mystery, the suggestion that she might, just might, be related to the Imperial family.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid it's not for sale. It may be simple junk in the eyes of the world, but for me it furnishes my one small connection to my late mother." Joka looked demurely away—and caught the apprentice's eye as she did so. The girl took the hint and went to call the madam. "I simply can't trade the memory of my mother for mere cash."

If she were to do so, it would be only when she was ready to retire as a courtesan.

“Aw, Fang. Now you’ve made things awkward with Joka,” Willow Boy griped.

“I certainly didn’t mean to,” Fang said, but his eyes never left the wooden box.

The madam appeared and clapped her hands loudly. “All right, gentlemen, the incense has burned down. It’s time to wrap things up.”

“Oh! All right. Fang, let’s head home.” Willow Boy practically dragged Fang out of the room. Joka typically found Willow Boy a rather unpleasant customer, but at least he knew when to make his exit.

“Until next time, sir,” she said as he left, in her usual cold, flat tone.

Chapter 12: Joka and Her Little Sister

About a month after Joka showed her broken jade tablet to the two customers, her little sister Maomao came back for the first time in nearly a year.

"I'm home," she announced with all her usual enthusiasm. She'd written ahead to say that she would be visiting the Verdigris House, so Joka was awake, though rubbing her eyes. There were no customers this afternoon, so most of the courtesans were getting a few precious moments of sleep.

"Maomao, it's been forever!" Pairin made to grab her up in a hug, but the old madam got between them.

"Hrmph! You don't look so different, considering it's been a whole year."

"Same to you, Grams."

"Can't believe you didn't stop in the moment you got back to the city. I could almost start to think you didn't care about me."

"I have a job, you know!"

Maomao did indeed look very tired.

"You're too young to be looking so exhausted," the madam remarked.

"I had something else I had to do first thing this morning."

"Hrm. I trust you're not so tired that you forgot my gift." The madam, stubborn as ever, stuck out a wrinkled hand as if to say *Hand it over.*

"Here." Maomao showed her a cloth-wrapped package. Inside was what looked like an ash-gray stone.

"Well, I'll be! You really did it! You brought me ambergris!" The old lady reached for it, but Maomao held it away from her.

Several other courtesans had gathered in the lobby in hopes of scoring a souvenir from Maomao as well.

"What's the matter? Give it to me," the old lady said.

"Oh, I don't know. A piece of ambergris this large and this pure? I feel like it might be a little much to just *give* it to you."

"How can you be such a miser after all I've done for you?"

“Here I thought selling you our medicine nearly at cost was plenty of repayment for that.”

“I’m renting you a space in one of the most prominent brothels in the pleasure district! Can’t you even bring yourself to be grateful?”

“It’s a landlady’s job to look after her tenants. And we’re practically suffocating in that tiny shop!”

So began one of the legendary arguments between Maomao and the old madam. Joka gave Pairin a look that said *Oh boy. Here we go.*

“Say this will cover a year and a half of our rent, or no ambergris,” said Maomao.

“A year and a half! Huh! For that fingernail-sized pebble? More like two months,” spat the old lady.

“Are you blind, Grams? How much do you think a chunk of ambergris this big would go for on the open market?”

Maomao had managed to make this about the rent. The man named Sazen might be running the Verdigris House’s apothecary shop at the moment, but the rent and other sundry expenses fell to Maomao and Luomen.

“What’s going on in here?” someone asked. Speak of the devil. Sazen had just come in.

“Exactly what it looks like,” Pairin told him. “Maomao and the old lady are going at it over the rent. Maomao hired you, so you’d better be rooting for her.”

“Why, Pairin, your color looks exceptionally good today.”

“Hee hee hee! I had a visit with an expert last night, someone I haven’t seen in a good year! It’s been so long, I took the opportunity to take care of him as *thoroughly* as I could.”

Her “specialist” was some soldier, Lihaku or something. He’d apparently been in the western capital all last year, just like Maomao. He was also, so one heard, indefatigable in bed, the perfect match for Pairin.

“Sazen, isn’t Chou-u with you?” Pairin asked.

Chou-u was a little boy, someone else who was here thanks to Maomao. A brothel was generally not a place to look after children, but enough money could convince the old lady to do just about anything, including accepting this young charge. He was well-liked by the ladies of the Verdigris House for his charming ways and drawing skills. He lived with Sazen in a shack near the

establishment—Luomen and Maomao had occupied it once, but since they both lived and worked at the palace now, Sazen had inherited it along with the shop.

"Oh, him? He's been going through a phase recently. I told him Maomao would be coming back today, but he just went off somewhere."

"Really? I guess that explains where Zulin is, then. That girl! She spends all her time playing. As if she didn't have her apprentice duties to attend to. Oh, it's terrible!" Pairin groaned, making a face that suggested it wasn't all that terrible.

"All right, Grams," Maomao was saying. "Five months. Don't forget it!"

"Grr! Who raised you to be such a grasping, covetous girl?"

The negotiations between Maomao and the old madam appeared to have reached their conclusion, so Joka and Pairin went over to them. It looked like Sazen had something to talk with her about, too, but he was willing to let her "sisters" have pride of place.

"Maomao! Have you lost weight?" Pairin said, clasping Maomao to her own voluptuous body in a hug.

Maomao looked like she might suffocate, but she managed, "I was always like this. I just put some meat on my bones when I was at the palace because they fed me well."

"Really? Well, anyway, we need to sit down for tea and talk about everything that's happened in the past year."

Pairin was about to bustle Maomao to her own room, but Joka intervened. "Let's talk in my chambers."

"Oh?"

Pairin had just been with a customer last night—or more precisely, until this very morning. There probably hadn't even been time to change the sheets on her bed. Joka, despite having been born and raised in a brothel, despised men. The last thing she wanted was to have a long, winding conversation in a room that still reeked of the previous night.

Joka's room was lined with bookshelves. In order to entertain the civil service test-takers, she had to read not only the Four Books and Five Classics but all manner of learned books.

"For your souvenir, Joka, I brought this," Maomao said, presenting her with a massive tome. It was a classical text, one Joka

didn't already own.

"I'm impressed you found this," she said, and she really meant it.

"Believe me, it wasn't easy." Maomao gazed into the middle distance. Her stay in the western capital, which she had initially told them should be just a few months, had turned into an entire year—one that had included an insect swarm. Things had been tough, all right.

"What about me? What do you have for me?" Pairin asked, her eyes shining.

"This is for you, Pairin." Maomao handed her a piece of what appeared to be silk worked with delicate embroidery. What could this be?

"What have we here?" asked Pairin.

"Underwear from an exotic land."

"Oh, boy!"

This evidently met with Pairin's approval. Her eyes sparkled even more brightly.

Maomao sipped her tea, but she seemed to be looking everywhere at once.

"What's wrong? You look restless," said Pairin.

"I was just thinking, I don't see Meimei anywhere."

"Ah! Meimei. Yes." She was the last of the Verdigris House's Three Princesses. "She got bought out."

"What?!" Maomao was so shocked, she spilled her tea.

"Aw! What are you doing?" Joka said, mopping it up with a handkerchief.

"Sorry. It's just...that's the first I've heard of it."

"I guess it would be. It sounds like you were pretty busy in the western capital, and Meimei told us we didn't have to let you know, so we didn't."

"Okay, but...bought out? Seriously? By who? Was it that regular of hers from way back? It wasn't some freak, was it?"

Maomao's distress was understandable: Courtesans aimed to have their contracts bought out by good patrons, but not all patrons were good. From that perspective, though, Meimei hadn't done too badly.

"Someone they call the Sage," Joka said.

"The Sage? You mean, like, *the* Sage?!"

"Oh, Maomao, you know him?"

In an effort to regain her composure, Maomao began mumbling something to herself. When Joka listened closely, she realized it was the names of medicinal and poisonous herbs.

"What was he doing buying out Meimei? Was he a customer here?" Maomao asked.

"Ah, yes," Pairin said. "Your daddy—er, I mean Master Lakan brought the Sage here before he left for the western capital."

The Sage, known for his skill at the game of Go, had asked Lakan if there weren't any suitable opponents for him—whereupon Lakan had brought him to the Verdigris House and pointed out Meimei.

"Meimei did spend all that time playing Go with that filthy, grinning, stubble-faced old bastard, after all," Joka said.

"Yes, he may have smelled like he hadn't bathed in three—well, make that ten—days, but she saw his play style up close," Maomao reflected.

Meimei had always played down her abilities, but she might have grown even stronger than the departed Fengxian.

"Hee hee hee! Listen to you both. You're terrible," Pairin said with a laugh. "After he'd been coming here about six months, the Sage said he wanted to buy out Meimei's contract."

"Not that Meimei was eager at first. The madam gave her a nudge—she said there wouldn't be a better patron down the line."

"So that's how it happened." Maomao sounded like she could accept that.

"The Sage is an acquaintance of Master Lakan's, and they still live in the capital, so you should be able to visit her anytime you like. That's why she didn't send you a letter."

"Huh. I'm still pretty shocked," Maomao said. Joka didn't blame her.

"Meimei is very lucky, I'd say. The Sage said he'd take her on as a pupil," she remarked.

"A pupil, huh? Even if he meant that, his family can't have been pleased."

"His wife has passed, and he has no children. Plus, he claims that he's long since cut ties with the family who came out of the woodwork when he became the 'Go Sage.' I gather he has lots of pupils, but I think our dear sister Meimei will be able to hold her own." Meimei was a full-fledged courtesan, and she had always been the best at the Verdigris House when it came to reading the

subtleties of other people's emotions. "Besides, with Master Lakan's introduction, who could interfere?"

Maomao didn't seem to like that, but she did seem to accept it. Courtesans tended to think of being bought out as the be-all and end-all, but life went on after the money was paid. Better to have a backer than not.

"Meimei is definitely the most newsworthy thing that happened around here. Let's see, what else was there..."

Joka and Pairin proceeded to fill Maomao in on everything that had happened in the past year: how Sazen was managing with the apothecary shop, somehow. How Chou-u had become rather contrary lately. How, with Meimei having moved on, Zulin's older sister was now the third best-selling courtesan at the Verdigris House.

"I guess the only other thing would be the effects of the locust swarm. Prices have gone up all around," Pairin said.

"Oh, I see," replied Maomao. More or less everything they had said was something she expected; other than the news about Meimei, she hardly seemed surprised by any of it.

It wasn't just Meimei—it was safe to assume that soon enough, proposals would come for Pairin as well. The changing of the guard at the Verdigris House was inevitable, yet Joka couldn't shake the sense that she was being left behind, alone.

Not that she had any intention of letting her anxieties show. She had to keep her customers convinced that she was a proud woman of noble blood. It wouldn't do for her to be whining and whimpering.

Joka did, however, have her doubts: namely about the woman in front of her, Maomao. She'd always assumed her "little sister" was in the same position as she was; she had even looked after Maomao when she was but a suckling infant, out of sheer pity.

But Joka and Maomao could not have been on more different paths in life. Each had a courtesan for a mother, but Joka had chosen the path of the courtesan herself, whereas Maomao had taken the way of the apothecary. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Joka had had no other choice but the courtesan's path, whereas for Maomao another possibility had been available. If Joka had had someone who could have been to her what Luomen was to Maomao, would her life have been different?

It wasn't that Joka regretted the life she had in light of this

hypothetical other existence. Nor did she feel any jealousy toward Maomao. That would be to strike down something Joka herself had helped to raise up.

While Joka was ruminating on all this, Maomao was telling Pairin about everything that had happened in the western capital: how she had gone as an assistant to the medical officers. How the freak strategist had been there (and what a pain it had been). How a man known as "the older brother of Lahan" had been along. She spoke about the swarm of insects and being attacked by bandits.

The fact that she seemed to skip over certain parts of the story was probably because there were things she couldn't reveal publicly. Naturally, serving at court would bring one into contact with things that must not be spoken of—although there were plenty of customers at the Verdigris House who didn't seem to understand that and would chatter quite freely.

"Okay, slow down. What's all this about being attacked by bandits? What happened exactly?" Pairin pressed.

"Pairin, dear sister, you can see Maomao doesn't want to talk about it. Leave it alone," Joka said. But she had a question of her own: "Who's this person you keep calling Lahan's Brother?"

That was the only thing that she was really curious about. Lahan's Brother came up in Maomao's stories more than any other name—if you could call it a name.

"He's the older brother of Lahan, and he definitely worked harder than anyone else on this trip," Maomao said.

"I don't follow."

"He worked harder than anyone, and you *left him behind*?" Joka inquired. Whoever Lahan's Brother was, he had certainly been through—and put up with—a lot.

"Sooo, Maomao, don't you have anything *else* to tell us?" Pairin cooed.

"What do you mean?"

Maomao might not have realized it herself, but she seemed subtly different now from before she had left. Joka had noticed it, and it certainly wouldn't escape Pairin, who was as sensitive as anybody to the telltale signs of love.

"Mmm, going to play dumb, are we? Then maybe I need to tickle you until you beg to tell me what you're hiding!"

"Urk..." Maomao went pale. To be tickled by the foremost bedroom performer in the Verdigris House—indeed, in the whole

pleasure district—would leave no one unscathed, not even Maomao.

As far as Joka was concerned, she wouldn't push Maomao when it came to secrets she couldn't divulge—but as for other subjects, even Joka felt a certain mischievous impulse. Of course, if Maomao really didn't want to tell them, Joka wouldn't genuinely force her. But Maomao's expressions were unmistakably different from before.

"It's... It's really nothing much," Maomao said.

"Oh, tell me another one. Do you really think you can lie to your big sister? You! Are! In! Love!"

Pairin's hands ran up and down Maomao, who reacted like a hissing cat. "St-Stop that! I mean it."

So she really didn't intend to tell them, even in the face of Pairin's tickle assault. That only seemed to inflame Pairin further; her eyes gleamed and grew ever more intense.

If Pairin was sensing something from Maomao, there was definitely love afoot. Joka believed she and Maomao had similar views of romance, and she knew that if she were to ever fall in love herself, she would certainly not want everyone teasing her about it. One more reason she tried to keep that word, *love*, at arm's length.

That rapport inspired her to take pity on Maomao; she didn't want to see the young woman pressed any harder on this subject. "Dear sister, I think she's had enough," Joka said. "If she were to wind up with any...*strange* proclivities thanks to you, who knows what it might lead to later?"

"Oops! You might be right about that."

Maomao, having endured the tickling, lay twitching on the floor. After a few long seconds, she heaved herself up with a resentful look at Pairin.

"Anyway," Joka said, "this is Maomao we're talking about. If she has a love story, I'm sure it's not fiery and passionate enough to be exciting to you, Pairin. If I had to guess, whoever he is, he just kept bugging her and bugging her while she waited patiently in hopes that he would give up already, but she finally lost that battle of wills."

Maomao blinked and looked at Joka. Joka had been merely talking off the cuff, but apparently she'd been right on target. She heaved a sigh.

"Maomao, you're very fortunate. This person is clearly very persistent, extremely stubborn, doesn't know when to quit—"

"Gee, he sounds like a real catch," Pairin interjected, but Joka

ignored her.

"—and is good enough that even you were willing to let him win."

Maomao looked down, which was something Joka knew she did when she was trying to hide embarrassment. It made Joka smile a little, but at the same time, she found herself feeling jealous. They had been raised in the same environment, with the same values, so how had their paths diverged so sharply?

"I don't know who he is, but he must know how to tough it out," she said.

In fact, it was a lie to say that she didn't know who Maomao's partner was. There was a time when Maomao had briefly returned to her apothecary shop, and one particular noble had visited her incessantly. When she'd entered palace service, it had been at his instigation. So Joka knew—it was her small act of kindness to pretend she didn't.

"I will warn you of one thing, though. Don't be content just taking. He may say he'll give you anything, but don't act like that's the end of it. Take what you get and become your best self. If you settle for just getting, you'll never be more than second- or third-rate."

Although she was speaking to Maomao, Joka felt like she was talking to her past self. Maomao cinched her lips tight. She was a smart young woman; she didn't need Joka to tell her this. She would have figured it out on her own.

"Well, well. Listen to you, Joka!"

"Pipe down, *sister*." Joka pursed her lips. Pairin had started getting handsy with Joka instead of Maomao now, so she pointedly got up and moved to sit in front of her desk. She took a sip of her tea, which had gone cold.

"By the way, something happened practically the moment we got back," Maomao said, trying to change the subject. "They found this corpse—the guy had been hanged. Murder, apparently. And right in the freak strategist's office."

Apparently Maomao had been so shaken by the experience that she was even willing to bring up the freak strategist of her own accord.

"Yikes," said Pairin.

"Well, this conversation took an unexpected turn," Joka said—not that she wasn't intrigued.

“Did Master Lakan kill him?” Pairin asked in a tone that suggested this would not have surprised her at all.

“This guy was a soldier, a real beefcake. That old fart could never have done it by himself,” Maomao said.

“True enough.” Lakan was *not* a physically strong man. If he were behind this killing, he would have had to get some of his subordinates to do it.

As it transpired, the man had been a three-timing womanizer.

“What a creep,” Pairin said.

“I’m not sure we’re in a position to criticize,” replied Joka.

It was hardly unusual for a courtesan to entertain many, many customers in a single night. She might even beg a few minutes away from one client, claiming she needed to go to the toilet, and sneak off to entertain another customer.

“So all three of the women he was fooling around with got together and killed him? Serves him right!” said Pairin.

“To be perfectly honest, I thought he’d brought it on himself. Not just that, but all three of these women were pretty girls with black hair. He couldn’t have made his type more obvious if he’d tried.” Maomao munched on a tea snack.

“Black hair?” Joka asked, unconsciously touching her own dark locks. She thought of her client from a month before. He’d been a soldier too.

“Hoh! You’re every bit as beautiful as I would expect of one of the most storied residents of such a famous house. Your lustrous black hair is particularly stunning.”

“Say, Maomao. Do you happen to know the dead man’s name?” she asked.

“Hrm, what was it again?” Maomao thought for a moment. “I’m pretty sure it was Wang Fang.”

Fang. That was the name of the man Willow Boy had introduced to her.

Joka heaved another sigh.

“What’s the matter, Joka?” Pairin asked.

“I think that man might have been a customer of mine.”

“Wow! Really?”

“Talk about your coincidences,” Maomao said, almost as surprised as her sister.

Joka felt a creeping gloom. She asked herself what to do, wondering if she should bring this up or not—but after a moment of

internal debate, she took out the trick box from her desk.

"Isn't that the thing you said was a memento of your mother?" Maomao asked.

"Something like that." Joka took out the broken jade tablet and placed it in front of Maomao.

"Aaand there it is. The *proof* that she's a nobleman's illegitimate child," Pairin said in a voice dripping with amusement—she knew Joka's routine with this stone.

"A month ago, a man named Fang asked me to sell this to him, but I said no."

"Really?" Maomao's eyes went wide and she studied the old tablet.

"He came to me because he thought I might be some forgotten child of the Imperial family. I kept it ambiguous, like I always do, and sent him on his way. I see... So he's dead."

He'd certainly had the air of a playboy; Joka almost had to admire the nerve of stringing along three different women at once. Still, it nagged at her—and Maomao was even more sensitive to such things than Joka. She continued to study the jade intently. Then she said, "Joka. What kind of man did you say gave you this jade?"

Joka had told Maomao of the story just once, many years ago.

"According to the woman who bore me, he was a handsome man with a noble air. According to the other courtesans, he was good-looking but smelled like an animal. By their accounts, he didn't really seem much like a member of the Imperial family."

Maomao clapped her hands. "That's right. You said you thought he was a bandit who must have stolen this thing and unloaded it here."

"His being a thief seems more likely to me than his being an Imperial family member," Joka replied. She had no real interest whose seed she had sprung from. At least, not anymore.

"So he smelled like a beast. Any other distinguishing features?"

"He had gnarled hands. No one of true noble lineage would have weathered hands, would they?"

"I'm not sure that's quite true."

"Huh?"

Maomao was still staring at the stone. Well, she was the one who served in the palace. She probably knew more about the Imperials than Joka did. Pairin, evidently not very interested in the

conversation, was stuffing her face with tea snacks.

Maomao was muttering to herself: “From the color, it looks like this is rokan jade. Valuable stuff. It looks like the surface was shaved down *before* it was broken. I’m guessing the original size was about nine centimeters.” Finally she said, “Joka, may I touch it?”

“Go ahead.”

“May I chip it a bit?”

“What do I care if it gets a little more beat up at this point?”

“Pairin, lend me your hair stick.”

“Here you go.”

Maomao jabbed the jade with the tip of the hair stick—Joka had said she didn’t care if it got a bit more damaged, but she was still surprised by Maomao’s enthusiasm. Then Maomao measured the depth of the score. “This is jadeite,” she declared. She handed the hair stick back to Pairin with a “Here, thank you.”

“Did you learn anything?” Pairin asked.

“This tablet is made of jadeite, a hard material. The damage to the surface didn’t occur naturally; it was deliberately scraped away, and that was done before the tablet was broken.”

“My, my. I wonder why they would scrape the tablet. It would only make it less valuable.”

“I don’t know why they would break it in half, but I suspect I can explain the scraping.” Maomao’s fingers brushed the tablet’s broken surface.

“Well, why?”

“Nobles and imperials sometimes find their lives in danger from members of their own family. Someone wanted to make sure nobody *knew* Joka was the offspring of such a family.”

Throughout history, imperial succession had frequently inspired wars in which blood was washed away with more blood. The books in Joka’s room furnished endless examples.

“And he only scraped the surface? Why wouldn’t he just throw it away?” Pairin asked lightly.

“Some things you can’t bring yourself to get rid of. Even if you want to.” Joka put the jade tablet away—that was enough of that.

“You don’t happen to know where the other half of that tablet is, do you, Joka?” Maomao asked.

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Didn’t think so.”

There seemed to be something Maomao still wasn't telling Joka—but if she was keeping it to herself, then it probably meant that she couldn't talk about it, or at least that she thought it was better not to. Joka didn't push her. If every mystery surrounding the jade were solved, Joka would no longer be Joka—and until she was ready to retire from the courtesan's life, being Joka was how she supported herself. She needed a bit of mystery.

Chapter 13: Yao and the Return of Lahan's Brother

Yao had learned quite a few skills while Maomao was in the western capital.

"Forceps, now."

"Yes, sir."

She'd begun to assist during the doctors' surgeries. This patient had shattered a bone in their arm, and they needed to extract the shards.

She was only standing by as a helper, but just being there was enough to make her stomach turn: the stench of blood, the man's muffled screams as he bit down on the gag in his mouth, and the bone sticking out of his arm at an unnatural angle.

Covering her mouth and nose provided only the slightest relief. Still, Yao fought back the nausea and handed over the forceps.

After the surgery was finished, Yao retched copiously. En'en rubbed her back, while Maomao brought her some water.

"Thank you," she said. "But the two of you should go back to work."

"Understood," Maomao answered and promptly left, but En'en hung around, looking concerned.

"Lady Yao, you mustn't push yourself. I can do it for you," she said. (Yao had admonished her not to call her "young mistress" while they were at work.)

"En'en, this is my job. Dr. Liu *finally* agreed to let me do this. Please don't take that away from me."

Yao had spent the past year industriously dissecting livestock. She'd experienced what it was like to kill them, and could separate out their internal organs.

Human bodies, though—those, she still wasn't used to.

She cleared the contents of her stomach one final time, then went back to work.

Maomao was cleaning the implements that had been used in the surgery, taking care not to cut herself as she washed off the blood and fat and boiled the tools to disinfect them. The disinfection process was something the palace physicians did as a matter of course, but apparently it was a revolutionary idea. You could succeed in a surgery, and yet lose the patient because there was some "poison" on the tools you'd used.

Yao stood beside Maomao. En'en was off doing something else that one of the doctors had asked for. "Here, Maomao, I'll help you."

"All right. Could you cool and wipe down the boiled scalpels?"

"Sure."

She had to make sure the tiny knives were completely dry. It was a very important job—the blades were prone to rust.

As Maomao washed each scalpel, she closed one eye and studied it, checking to make sure the blade wasn't chipped. If there were any imperfections, the blade would be polished, and if that still didn't do the trick, it would be swapped out for a new scalpel.

Maomao herself was beginning to be entrusted with not just helping with treatments, but doing them herself. She'd always seemed comfortable treating the wounded, but since her return from the western capital, she'd clearly taken a step up. Otherwise Dr. Liu would never have skipped over other physicians to have Maomao perform procedures. This was clearly well outside the bounds of a palace lady's job description, however, and Maomao's name was never actually recorded as the person wielding the knife.

This was as far as a palace lady assisting the medical officers could hope to go at this moment. No matter how good she was at her job, she would never be put forth publicly. That pained Yao, so she believed it must hurt Maomao even worse. But to all outward appearances, Maomao hardly seemed bothered. Yet here Yao was, her head constantly spinning not just with work, but with so many other things as well.

"Hey, Maomao?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you ever, you know, worry about things?" Yao found herself being much more direct than she had meant to be. Would Maomao think Yao was making fun of her?

"Sure. Lots of things," Maomao replied, unruffled.

"Lots of things? Like what?"

After a second Maomao said, “Like...human relationships.”

“Wha?” Yao’s heart skipped a beat. Was Maomao talking about...her? She wondered, but she was afraid to ask too directly.

Yao looked Maomao in the face, wondering who she could be talking about. Eventually Maomao said, somewhat awkwardly, “There’s...all these freaks around, you know?”

“Oh! Freaks! Right.”

Maomao wouldn’t say it in so many words, but she was referring to her birth father, Grand Commandant Kan. People often called him the freak strategist, and for a while he had gone virtually everywhere Maomao did. It certainly couldn’t have been easy, Yao reflected. Her uncle was always on her case, but at least she didn’t have strange folks chasing her hither and yon.

“It’s tough, huh?” Yao said.

“Yes. Very tough.”

Yao, feeling relieved, went back to wiping down the now cool scalpels. They’d just finished washing the blades when they heard footsteps approaching—distinctive, tapping, rhythmic footsteps.

“Hulloooo! Miss Chue is here!”

Striking a funny pose was, as she’d identified herself, Chue. She was a lady-in-waiting to the Moon Prince, probably a few birthdays past her twentieth, and during their time in the western capital, she had been attacked by bandits and seriously wounded. Her right arm was almost useless, and she’d broken her collarbone and even damaged some internal organs, but she seemed in high spirits just the same.

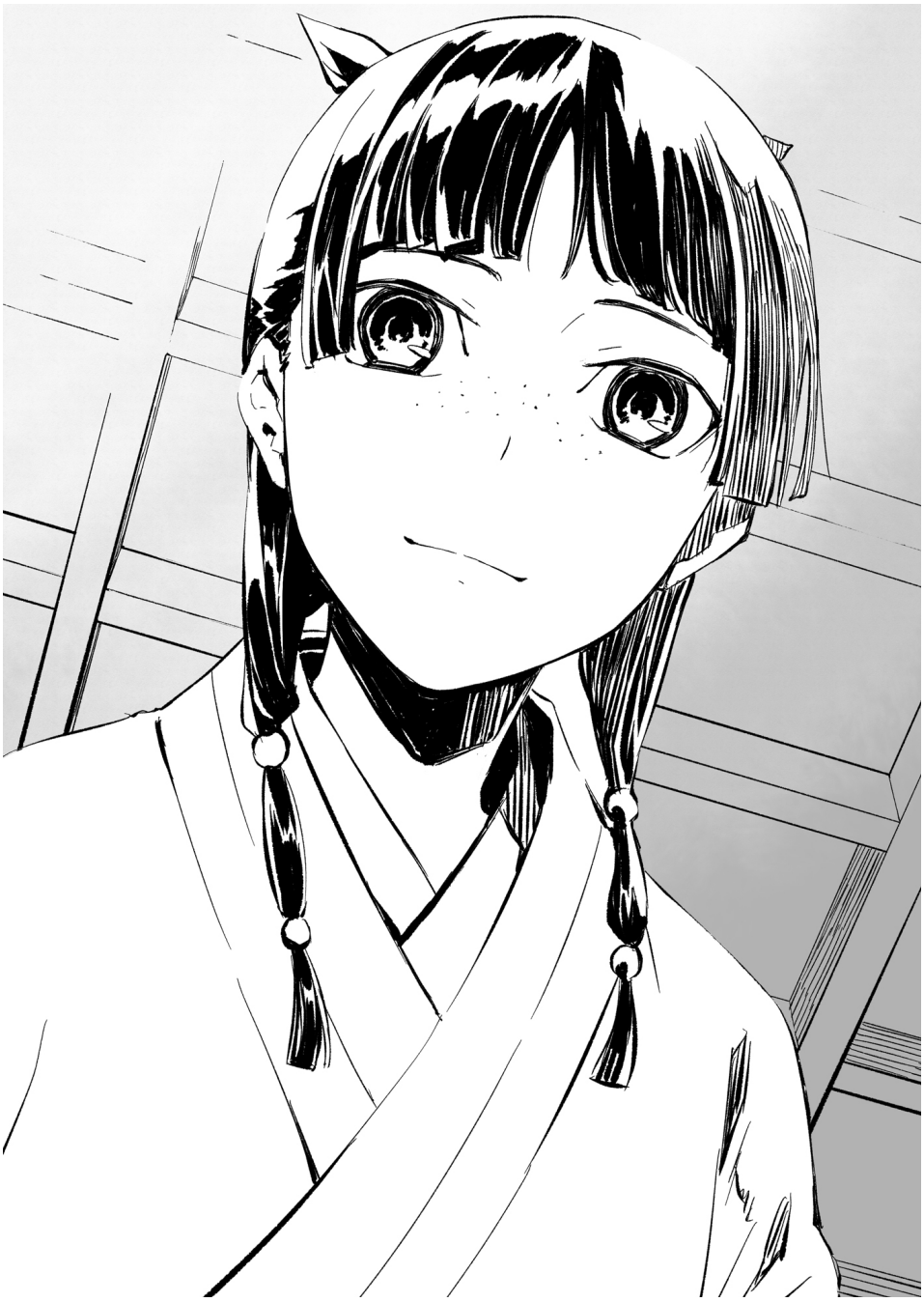
“Phew! Another day of intense pain, huh! I’d like to ask for an exam and some medicine, but pretty please mix the medicine with lots of honey. Oh! Yoo-hoo! You there—could you get me some hot tea?”

No sooner had Chue entered the medical office than she sat down as if it were the most natural thing in the world, demanding a drink from the nearest apprentice physician. She also helped herself to some of the tea snacks. Could she be any more audacious? Dr. Liu gave her a cold stare. Being the tough man of medicine he was, he probably wished he could chase her out, but he was forestalled by the Moon Prince’s orders.

Recently, Dr. Liu had been keeping the medical office assistants close when doing his work. Maybe it was because of Chue’s frequent visits—he may have hoped that having other women

around would set her at ease. Yao frankly wondered whether such consideration was necessary at all in Chue's case, but there was certainly no avoiding the reality that the woman would bear this wound for the rest of her life.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, share a cup of tea with me? And you, the young lady over there, you come too," Chue said, indicating Maomao and Yao.



Yao could see at a glance how close Maomao and Chue were. That was only natural when they'd spent a year together in the western capital, but Yao had the sudden urge to point out that she had known Maomao longer than Chue had.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue, I'm at work now, so I'm afraid not. And so is Miss Yao."

"It's true. We're working." The diffident answer was the most Yao could muster. Chue might think her rather boring, but Yao had never had much of a gift for humor.

"Goodness gracious, that is *such* a shame!" Chue said.

"More importantly, how have you been feeling?" Maomao asked, and Yao could hear in her voice that it wasn't just a polite question; she was really concerned.

"Oh! I can't laugh with a broken collarbone! And when I try to sleep, the pain is just awful."

"Boil some medicine for her, Maomao," Dr. Liu said brusquely. "And give her some painkillers for bedtime." For the most part, he left Chue-related matters to Maomao—who, rumor had it, had been the first one to treat the injured Chue.

"All right, Miss Maomao. Please give me lots of honey, lots of citrus, and as little medicine as possible."

"I'm afraid I only have huge, heaping helpings of medicine." Maomao ground up some herbs in a mortar, then put them in a cup and mixed in plenty of honey and citrus.

"Oh, you're no fun."

Maomao, looking as if she were finding this a great deal of trouble, topped the green sludge with the tiniest excuse for a wolfberry and put a straw in it.

Chue drank it down, making a sour face.

Was it inappropriate if Yao felt a twinge of jealousy at their easy back-and-forth?

"These are painkillers for before you go to bed," Maomao said, handing Chue a paper packet. "If you're not in any pain, you don't need to take them."

"That's a big help! I can't even turn over in my sleep."

At first, Yao had thought Chue must be exaggerating, but when she saw the bandages on her hand and the wounds that ran all the way from her chest to her belly, she began to wonder instead what

manner of beast had attacked the woman.

For a mere lady-in-waiting to be seen by one of the most highly ranked physicians in the palace would normally have been unconscionable—the fact that it was happening anyway attested to just how great Chue's achievements must have been. Nonetheless, as someone who didn't know Chue very well, the best thing Yao could think was *Who is this weirdo?*

"Oh! That reminds me, Miss Maomao." Chue fished two letters from the folds of her robes. "I have letters for you! Miss Chue is not a goat, so don't worry, she wouldn't eat them!"

"And neither would your goat, because you left it back in the western capital, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes! Much like how we forgot your poor brother."

"We don't talk about that." Maomao made a big X with her hands.

"Oh, don't worry! He'll be home very soon. His ship should arrive any day."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Yao, who had no idea what any of this meant, started to feel a little left out, but at the same time, she didn't have it in her to simply jump into the conversation.

Maomao studied the letters intently. They didn't say who the sender was, but the handwriting and paper seemed to give her a good idea. One of the letters she regarded with a scowl; the other, with what Yao took to be steeled resolve.

"You, come here when you've had your medicine. I'll change your bandages," said Dr. Liu.

"Yessir! Right away, sir!" Chue said and trundled into the exam room.

"You too, Maomao."

"Yes, sir. Yao, could you take care of the rest of these?"

"Yeah, sure."

The doctor had summoned Maomao too, so only Yao was left to finish wiping down the scalpels.

When Yao's shift was over, she went back to Lakan's estate. And someone was waiting for her.

"Lady Yao, welcome. I've found a new place you might like. What do you think?"

It was the servant called Sanfan, who approached Yao holding

the blueprints of a house. Sanfan looked like a handsome young man at first glance, but in fact she was a woman in men's clothing. It was notable that she greeted Yao not with "welcome home" but simply "welcome."

"You could move here, just to try it out. If you don't like it, you could move again. I'll find as many places as you need." Sanfan sounded very solicitous, but this was a roundabout way of saying *Get the hell out.*

At that point, En'en appeared, putting herself between Sanfan and Yao. "Young mistress, you must be tired. How about a bath?" she said. Then she turned to Sanfan. "Sanfan, the young mistress is tired. Perhaps we could talk about this later."

"But of course. I can have everything prepared at a moment's notice. You have but to ask."

"Heh, how kind of you. It looks like *you're* going somewhere yourself. Sure you don't need to hurry?" Yao said. She had grown up a little herself. Instead of getting openly angry, she responded with her own equivalent of *Hurry up and leave.*

"Ah, yes. We'll be having visitors today. The two of you can feel free to relax in the annex," Sanfan told them. Then she left, the resentment practically radiating off her. En'en watched her go, a conflicted expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" Yao asked. Normally, En'en would have hissed and spat at Sanfan as she left, but today she did nothing. In fact, she'd been acting a bit unusual ever since her recent day off.

"Ugh, *such* bad taste," En'en was mumbling.

"Who has bad taste? What kind of taste?"

"Oh, it's nothing." En'en prepared a change of clothes and a towel.

The annex on Lakan's property where Yao and En'en were currently living had no bath of its own. Instead, they'd been given a particularly large bucket that they could use in lieu of a tub. At first they had borrowed the bathtub in the main house, but that servant, Sanfan, had gone out of her way to give them the bucket. Once again, it seemed like an act of kindness on the surface, the message seemed to be that they should *not* use the house's bathtub.

Sanfan clearly felt hostility toward Yao, and Yao was none too fond of Sanfan either.

"Come on, young mistress. Let's wash up," En'en said.

The hot water was already waiting for them. Sifan, another of

Lakan's servants, was still young, but he was sharp. He'd judged when Yao and En'en would get home and had made sure the water was ready.

En'en added some cold water to the hot so it would be the perfect temperature. Yao took off her clothes and got in the bucket. She wished she could scrub herself down before she got in the bath bucket, but they didn't exactly have the facilities, so it would have been tough.

En'en began to wipe Yao's arms and legs with a soft cloth. No matter how many times Yao told En'en that she could bathe herself, she never seemed to listen.

"Lady Yao? Young mistress?" En'en said.

"Yeah, En'en? What is it?"

En'en wet down Yao's hair and began massaging her scalp. "Now that Maomao is back, I wonder if it might be about time for us to think about moving out." She sounded like she was gauging Yao's reaction.

"Maybe... But moving is so much work. We can take our time and think about it." Yao found that the pleasantly warm water was making her drowsy.

It was going on a year since Yao and En'en had taken up residence at Lakan's mansion. At first, it had just been a way of escaping the various marriage proposals her uncle brought her—but then her uncle had gone to the western capital. So why was she still here?

She was worried about her friend Maomao, that was why. She'd extended her stay hoping to get some word of her.

Well, now Maomao was back. What reason could she come up with next?

Yao was perfectly well aware that her pretexts were flimsy in the extreme. Not to mention they kept changing.

"Say, when do you suppose Master Lahan will get home?" Yao asked.

"Not for a while yet, I would guess," En'en replied, but Yao could hear a tremble in her voice at the mention of Lahan's name.

"If we're going to move, I think maybe we should consult with him first."

"I really don't think there's any need," En'en said firmly. She did not like Lahan, probably because he could be quite short with Yao.

En'en frequently spoke ill of Lahan. He had a thing for older women and especially spent a lot of time with widows. He was obsessed with money, and in spite of being a public servant, he used his household help as proxies to do commercial business on his behalf. Not to mention that he'd conspired with Lakan to help the old man take over the family headship, chasing out his own parents and grandfather in the process.

En'en always peppered these accusations with plenty of personal animus, but they weren't untrue. Yao understood that Lahan was not a good person in the strict sense—but his actions weren't those of a villain.

Lahan was shorter than Yao, and it was hard to call him very handsome; he was quite smart but athletically hopeless. He always acted kind to women, but ultimately it was only on the surface; if you tried to go any deeper, he would promptly rebuff you.

So, viewed as a man, was he attractive? The answer was absolutely not. At least, not by Yao's standard. So why couldn't she get him off her mind?

Yao knew very well that Lahan thought of her as nothing more than Maomao's colleague. He was decent to her as he would be to any acquaintance of his younger sister, but if she sought more than that, he immediately distanced himself.

Yao knew very well that her attempts were hopeless. The closer she got to Lahan, the farther away he would move himself. Yet she had the distinct sense that if she distanced herself now, she would never be able to approach him again, and it left her unable and unwilling to draw back. Call it shameless, ugly, or pathetic; Yao couldn't hold her peace.

"Say, En'en."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Are you ever going to get married?"

"G-Goodness, what brought this on?" En'en asked as she dried Yao off.

"Well, I know you're perfectly popular. You could have your pick."

Certainly, En'en was the right age to be getting married.

"I serve you, Lady Yao. I have no intention of getting married until you're safely matched yourself."

"Which you have no intention of ever letting me do, it appears."

“P-Perish the thought, milady,” En’en said, clearly shaken. Her hands quivered slightly as she passed Yao her clothing. “If there should ever be a gentleman worthy of you, Lady Yao, I would gladly sew your wedding garments myself.”

“Great. And what kind of man, exactly, would be worthy of me?”

“Wha?” En’en was shocked again.

Yao tied her sash and ran a comb through her damp hair.

“W-Well…” En’en said.

When they went to the annex’s living room, dinner was already set out for them. This was another act of consideration on Sifan’s part; on days when En’en had work, he would make sure dinner was prepared. En’en oversaw the menu, so there was no question of the meals’ nutritional balance.

“He would have to be…” En’en took a deep breath. She started speaking, slowly at first, but then faster and faster, picking up steam as she went along. “An adult man who had his act together. He couldn’t be too much older than you, however; I think something less than ten years your senior would be ideal. We would have to know where he came from, and his family would have to be at least as good as yours. He would have to be about 180 centimeters tall, well-built, and of course healthy. It would be wonderful if he were intelligent, but only if it didn’t give him a big head—it should simply make him quick-witted and adaptable. He would tackle difficult situations, never giving up and never losing hope. He would help the helpless, and never simply resort to violence for its own sake. Hopefully he would be halfway good-looking, but the most important thing would be what’s inside. I would much rather he be innocent and naive than a womanizer. He should be tolerant, not restrictive, and humble in all things. That’s most important of all!”

“Does a man like that even exist?” Yao asked. She thought maybe En’en was setting the bar a bit too high.

“He must be out there! You only have to look!”

Yao wasn’t convinced. She thought En’en didn’t want her to get married and was deliberately setting an impossible standard. Still, Yao herself didn’t want to get married while she was still learning her trade. If anything, she thought it would be perfect if En’en would find someone who would bear children in Yao’s place.

“And another thing. That’s not *my* ideal, that’s yours, isn’t it,

En'en?"

"Yes, for of course your husband will become my master as well, Lady Yao. I'm simply telling you about my ideal master!" En'en dished some congee into a bowl and set it in front of Yao.

"Well, if we do find a man like that, maybe *you* can marry him, then."

Yao was just taking a sip of congee when they heard a voice in the distance.

"Heeey! Is anyone home?" It sounded like a young man. "Lahaaaan! Are you here or what?"

Whoever it was, he was looking for Lahan.

"Master Lahan isn't back yet, is he?" Yao said. The estate didn't have many servants to begin with, and by this hour there were fewer still. Meanwhile, Sanfan had just gone off somewhere.

"I can't just let you in! Tell me your name!" someone challenged him.

"What?! Don't you know who I am?!" the newcomer shouted back.

Something was very strange. Curious, Yao put down her spoon.

"There's no need for you to get involved in this, young mistress," En'en said.

"I'm just going to take a quick look."

En'en didn't look eager to come along, but she also didn't seem like she was going to stop Yao; instead she brought some overwear and placed it over her mistress's shoulders.

Meanwhile the visitor was saying, "You must be new here! You ought to have some idea who lives in the house you serve, you know!"

"Sounds to me like a suspicious character trying to talk his way inside!"

"How dare you!"

At the gate, a man in his twenties was arguing with the door guard. He was on the tall side, well-built, and tanned enough that for a moment Yao thought he must have been a southerner, but his facial features were very much those of someone from the central region. Nothing about his face really distinguished him, but he could still be called handsome in his own way.

The commotion had attracted not only Yao, but also Sifan and the other servants, as well as Junjie, the boy who'd come home with Lahan.

“What’s going on here?” Sifan asked. Behind him, Wufan and Liufan stood looking uneasy.

“There’s someone here who claims he’s a member of the family and is demanding to be let in,” the guard said.

“Wh—Why, that’s—!” Junjie went toward the guard and the suspicious newcomer.

“Now, you listen! My name is—”

“Mister Lahan’s Brother!” Junjie exclaimed.

“Guh?”

“It’s been much too long,” Junjie said to the suspicious character—ahem, Lahan’s Brother. “What happened to you? I was told you stayed behind in the western capital to take care of some unfinished work.”

“Er... I did stay behind, but it wasn’t...” Lahan’s Brother started to trip over his own words. From his name Yao guessed that the man was, well, Lahan’s brother, but the two of them seemed nothing alike.

“My respect for you runs so deep!” Junjie said. “I heard afterward about how the locust swarm didn’t do more damage than it did because you went all over I-sei Province sounding the alarm. Without you, Lahan’s Brother, hundreds of thousands of people might have starved—that’s what Mister Lahan told me. I was speechless. The fact that me and my family are alive today is all thanks to you!”

Junjie looked at Lahan’s Brother with sparkling eyes. Lahan’s Brother appeared overpowered by his innocent gaze.

“Junjie, sweetheart, I’m sorry to interrupt, but could you introduce me to this person?”

“Oh! Of course, Lady Yao, my apologies. This is Mister Lahan’s Brother. He’s Master Lahan’s older brother.”

Yes, she’d gathered that much. But she couldn’t help noticing that “Lahan” was a “Master” while “Lahan’s Brother” warranted only a “Mister” at best.

Sanfan must have gone to meet this Lahan’s Brother, and they must have somehow missed each other.

“You’re Master Lahan’s honored older brother?” the door guard said, looking distinctly unhappy. He’d just been treating this man like a complete stranger. “I b-b-beg your pardon!” He knelt in the dirt and bowed his head. If this person was Lahan’s older brother, then he, too, was a member of the La clan.

“Oh, it’s fine. You’re fine. I’m used to it by now.” Lahan’s Brother took the guard by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “I don’t need anyone bowing their head to me. It’s my bad for coming home without waiting for someone to come and get me. Really, you don’t have to give it another thought. Go back to whatever you were doing.”

He shooed the guard away, evidently uninterested in meting out any punishment.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Sifan. “I’m Sifan, a servant at this house, and behind me are Wufan and Liufan. Sanfan went to meet you at the dock, but it seems she was too late. I can’t apologize enough.”

“You don’t have to apologize at all, really. It wasn’t that far. It’s been so long since I was back in the royal capital that I appreciated the walk.”

“The walk? It’s really quite a ways from the port to the house…”

“Ah, but paved roads make everything so easy, don’t they?”

“Are you not tired, sir?”

“It was fine exercise! Goodness knows I didn’t have anything to do on the ship.”

Apparently, despite being a member of the La clan, he was the outdoorsy type.

Yao pondered what to do, then took a step forward. Self-introductions, she was convinced, were an important place to start. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. My name is Lu Yao, and this household has been showing me its hospitality. This young lady with me is En’en.”

“Er… Oh,” said Lahan’s Brother. He seemed shaken when he looked at Yao and En’en.

“Might I ask *your* name, sir?” Yao said. It seemed altogether too rude to go around calling him Lahan’s Brother. Some might say it was forward of a woman to ask a gentleman’s name, but Yao was a woman with a job. She didn’t survive by being passive and receptive.

“Ahem. Well, I’m…” Lahan’s Brother sounded lost again, and he kept shooting glances at Junjie, who continued to regard him with a shine in his eyes. “You can just call me Lahan’s Brother.”

“L-Lahan’s Brother?” Yao repeated.

“Ahem. Yes. I’m the brother of Lahan, *ergo*, Lahan’s Brother.”

He looked toward the setting sun, and his eyes were clear, filled with what might have been enlightenment or might have been sheer resignation.

He was certainly unusual enough to be a La clan member, Yao thought. She also thought—although she didn't say—that Lahan's Brother was very close to En'en's "ideal master."

Chapter 14: Ah-Duo's Truth

The voice of a rambunctious boy echoed around Ah-Duo's palace. A lady-in-waiting chased him as he raced back and forth around the huge pavilion.

"Slow down! That's dangerous!"

"Don't wanna!" The boy stuck out his tongue and roundly ignored the serving woman. In his failure to look where he was going, however, he ran smack into Ah-Duo.

"Oh! Lady Ah-Duo," the lady-in-waiting said, bowing her head apologetically. All the women had been with Ah-Duo since her time in the rear palace, and that helped everything go smoothly.

"Ha ha ha! You're looking lively. Just make sure you watch where you're going next time," she said, helping the little boy to his feet.

"Sorry, Lady Ah-Duo," the boy said.

Another boy came up and tugged on her hand. "Lady Ah-Duo! Wanna play hide-and-seek?"

"Afraid I can't today. I've got a visitor coming." She mussed the child's hair, then did the same to all the other kids.

The children at Ah-Duo's palace were all survivors of the Shi clan. "Yue," the Moon Prince, had asked her to give them a safe haven.

They still didn't know what had happened to their parents. Ah-Duo went out of her way not to tell them. The sharper children had figured out on their own that they should keep it to themselves, and the younger ones had forgotten their parents. They all had to forget that they were ever members of the Shi clan. If they ever proclaimed that they were, then they might well be headed for the gallows, no matter how Ah-Duo or Yue tried to protect them.

A slim youth approached. "Now, let's stay out of Lady Ah-Duo's way. Come over here." This person was handsome enough to make young ladies swoon, but she was not a man.

"Will you take care of them, Sui?"

"Of course, milady."

Suirei was another Shi clan survivor, and she was also the granddaughter of the former emperor. She, too, had been given harbor at Ah-Duo's residence because, officially, she could not exist.

Suirei was clever and a clear thinker, and knew much about medicine. It was a waste, Ah-Duo thought, for such a distinguished person to languish in this pavilion, but there was no choice. Suirei could live in hiding or she could not live at all.

"Ah, yes," Ah-Duo said. "Maomao's coming. You don't want to see her, Sui?"

Ah-Duo had sent Maomao a letter; Maomao had responded and was on her way.

"Maomao...?" Suirei paused. "I don't think I will."

"Aw, and you looked like such good friends on our trip."

When she'd gone to the western capital, Ah-Duo had induced Suirei to come along. She and Maomao had even ended up treating a wounded man together.

"It's only your imagination, I'm sure." Suirei took some of the children by the hand.

"Shame, when she's one of the few people you can actually talk to..."

Very few knew about Suirei. Outwardly, her existence was not even acknowledged. If you didn't talk to people when you could, meet them when you could, you would gradually be forgotten.

"I won't be around forever," Ah-Duo mumbled, scratching the back of her head. Then she went inside.

Maomao showed up right on time. The reason it had taken her a while to make it over after sending her letter was presumably because, unlike the retired and hidden Ah-Duo, Maomao was quite busy.

"Lady Ah-Duo," Maomao said. "It's been a long time."

"Yes! Quite a long time," chirped Chue, who was with Maomao. She'd been seriously injured in the western capital, but she kept right on smiling, just like she always had. It was Chue to whom Ah-Duo had entrusted her letter to Maomao.

"Ha ha ha! Sounds like you had a spot of trouble in the west," Ah-Duo said. She was reclining on a couch, sipping some juice. She could certainly have had wine available—Maomao would have appreciated it—but considering what they were going to talk about, it didn't seem quite appropriate.

“A lot happened,” said Maomao.

“Oh, yes, quite a lot! Would you like to hear Miss Chue’s story, Lady Ah-Duo?” Chue was being unusually proactive in this conversation. It seemed to spark Maomao’s curiosity, for she looked back and forth between the two women. She must have been surprised when she received Ah-Duo’s letter from none other than Chue.

“What exactly *are* you and Miss Chue, Lady Ah-Duo?” she asked.

“Considering that I used Chue to deliver my letter to you, surely you at least have an educated guess?” Ah-Duo took a baked treat from the table and took a bite. It was buttery and smelled lovely.

“May I take it that you’re Miss Chue’s real master, milady?”

Indeed, she had hit the mark.

“That’s right,” Ah-Duo said.

“Yes indeedy!” added Chue.

“His Majesty handed Chue off to me not long after I moved here.”

“And me barely back from giving birth! I show up and they say *No, no, you work somewhere else now!* Isn’t it just terrible?” Chue pretended as if she were weeping.

“It would explain why you and the Moon Prince never quite seem to be acting in concert,” Maomao said. She sighed, but it sounded like it made sense to her.

“If I don’t have to explain, so much the better.” Ah-Duo offered the treats to Chue and Maomao. Chue immediately began to help herself; indeed, she was probably welcome to. She’d lost the use of her dominant arm because she had faithfully carried out Ah-Duo’s orders. Her mistress was probably ready to wink at a bit of outrageous face-stuffing. “You’re correct—Chue serves me.”

“Yes,” Chue affirmed, wiping some crumbs from the corner of her mouth. “Miss Chue was told that Lady Ah-Duo’s orders rank even above His Majesty’s.”

“But all this time you’ve acted like you’re serving Ji—I mean, the Moon Prince,” Maomao said.

“Feel free to call him Jinshi; I don’t mind,” Ah-Duo said. “I call him Yue, myself.”

Maomao looked hard at her. Maybe she had a sense of what Ah-Duo was going to say today—and that sense was probably correct.

“Lady Ah-Duo said that my job was to make the Moon Prince

happy," Chue said, and Ah-Duo nodded.

"So I did."

Maomao remained silent. She hesitated, Ah-Duo knew, because sometimes even when you were sure about something, you weren't sure it was right to say it. That was why Ah-Duo would be the one to give it voice.

Chue leaned back in her chair, knowing she had nothing more to contribute. She was normally a very lively presence, but she understood her role. Ah-Duo was confident that Chue would tell no one of what she was about to say to Maomao.

"Why would I order her to do that?" Ah-Duo began. "It's because Yue is my son by birth."

As far as Ah-Duo could tell, Maomao didn't appear surprised. Instead she glanced away from Ah-Duo, looked at the ground, and then gave a little sigh.

She looked like someone who'd been told the answer to a question they wouldn't have asked.

"From your reaction, I take it you already guessed the connection between me and Yue long ago."

"I thought it seemed like a possibility."

"And the possibility that the real Imperial younger brother and my son were switched?"

After a moment, Maomao said, "Yes." It was clear from her expression that she had strongly suspected, but would have preferred not to actually know. Ah-Duo occasionally heard talk about Yue and Maomao from others, but now she thought she saw why their relationship wasn't getting anywhere. Maomao was doing everything in her power to pretend it didn't exist.

"Why would you tell me this, milady?"

"Oh, come now. Every rumor I heard made it sound like things between you and Yue had developed in the western capital."

Maomao immediately scowled at Chue. Maomao was presumably the kind who didn't like talk of her love life getting around. Ah-Duo knew her pain: She'd often been teased about her relationship with His Majesty, and more than once she'd been on the point of strangling one of the other palace women. At the time, Ah-Duo had viewed His Majesty as merely a milk sibling and an old friend. She remembered how profoundly unpleasant it had been to endure people's taunts.

The hell of it was, when it came to *other* people's romances, she

suddenly saw the fun in it.

She shook her head: *No, no!* It was wrong to do to others something she hadn't enjoyed suffering herself.

"Yue is quite a handful, if I may say so myself," she said.

"I'm aware," Maomao said with a distant look.

"At the same time, he's also, well, a young man. I expect he'll summon you to his palace in due course."

"Chue gave me that summons along with your letter, Lady Ah-Duo."

Ah-Duo looked at Chue, who made a point of whistling innocently.

"Do you understand what it means to answer that summons?"

Ah-Duo didn't know for sure if Yue had called Maomao to his palace because he wished to establish relations between them as a man and a woman. Maybe he just wanted to talk about the weather or ask for her advice on something. But in the general understanding, when a man of the nobility called a woman to his personal residence, it was as good as a command to spend the night with him.

"I come from the pleasure district," Maomao said, heaving a sigh.

"Yue's not just another trick," Ah-Duo cautioned her. "The most noble blood in the nation runs in his veins."

After a second, Maomao said, "I'm more familiar than most with how to avoid pregnancy. I intend to make sure there's nothing to regret afterward."

Maomao would always take the realistic perspective. As Yue was Ah-Duo's son, he was the child not of the former emperor but of the current one—and the difference between His Majesty's younger brother and the reigning Emperor's own eldest son was immense. On the one hand there was the Empress's boy, not even seven yet. On the other, the son of His Majesty's consort, already well into adulthood. From the Empress's perspective, the only thing she could do was pray that nothing happened to His Majesty before her own son had reached maturity.

Li functioned on a system of hereditary succession, with inheritance usually going to the oldest son. And it was Yue who, by this calculation, was closest to the throne.

Empress Gyokuyou had much foreign blood, and no small number of the Emperor's advisors looked askance at the young

prince's red hair. Some also made the case to the Emperor that he should prefer Consort Lihua's son on the basis of consanguinity.

In the past, Ah-Duo had conspired with the Empress Dowager to exchange their infants. She could not turn back time; Jinshi would have to live in his false position, not knowing the truth.

Ah-Duo could hardly turn motherly at this late date. Yet nonetheless she asked Maomao, "If something does come of it, would you consider raising the child in secret?"

In spite of all antipregnancy medications and abortifacients, a child would be conceived when a child was conceived.

"Might it not be that tens or hundreds of lives could easily be stolen away for that child's sake?" Maomao feared that political war could break out. "And if so, wouldn't it be much easier for me alone to pierce my belly with a long needle?"

"A needle? Is that how you usually do abortions in the pleasure district?"

"Do you think it would be better for me to drink quicksilver, be punched in the stomach, or maybe dunk myself in freezing water?"

Maomao understood. She was not a woman who would fall head over heels for Yue just because of his good looks. She knew what resolve would be required if she accepted his feelings.

All the more reason Ah-Duo pitied her.

"That's not the only thing. If you accept Yue's affections, Maomao, you'll never be able to leave this country again."

"*Most* people in this country can't leave it. Most of them can't even leave the land where they live."

"True enough."

The life of a Linese woman was decided by the household she was born into. The better a girl's family was, the less free she was to leave her home; there were even those who spent their entire lives inside the family estate.

Nonetheless, Ah-Duo looked into the distance. "If I said that someday I'd like to leave this land and learn more of the great wide world, would you think me naive?"

"No, ma'am." Maomao shook her head. "In far places you'll find many things we don't have here. And not just things—words, cultural achievements, as well as medicinal herbs, drugs, and methods of treatment. It's only natural—with a different climate and environment come different illnesses!"

Maomao seemed to grow notably more passionate as this

declaration went on. Ah-Duo sensed in this woman a kindred interest in foreign lands. She'd been to the western capital twice, which was more traveling than many people did in their entire lives. Her knowledge was certainly broader and deeper than that of most women her age.

"Heh heh! My dream ended when I was fourteen," Ah-Duo said. She thought back to when she had been at liberty. As the daughter of the crown prince's nursemaid, she'd been brought up as a milk sibling to the current Emperor.

"Call me Yoh," her "younger brother" had said. The name meant "sun." Yue was *Yue*, "the moon," precisely because he formed a pair with the sun, but could never surpass it.

Ah-Duo dressed in men's clothing, and she and her "little brother" had snitched snacks together, climbed trees, occasionally played hooky from their teachers' classes, and laughed with each other when they teased Gaoshun, who was in many ways like an older brother to them.

If Ah-Duo had in fact been a boy, perhaps they would still be doing those things now.

Ah-Duo had regarded Yoh as a friend—but she mustn't forget. He stood at the very top of the nation's hierarchy, and Ah-Duo was merely one of his subjects. When she had been asked to be his "instructor" she could not refuse.

Again and again she'd thought of trying to get out of it, but there was no way she could do that. Eventually she'd arrived at a sense of calm resignation: She was his companion on the path, she saw. The emperor was a man who had no freedom, not from the moment he was born. Setting aside the foolish ruler who had forgotten his role—Yoh was too smart for that. Only within the walls of the rear palace could he do as he pleased. He knew that when he received the emperor's crown, it would bind him hand and foot his whole life long.

To Ah-Duo, Yoh was a friend, but to him, she was not. She knew there could be no equality between a man and a woman, yet all the same Ah-Duo felt as if her feathers had been plucked.

Yes, the members of the royal family lacked freedom from the time of their birth—yet they could also steal the liberty of anyone they chose.

Yoh hadn't realized. He'd forgotten that he stood in the place of the one who steals, and he'd made Ah-Duo his "instructor," and

made her spend the night with him.

Now Ah-Duo was speaking to Maomao, who looked set to walk the same path she herself had. As a mother, perhaps it would have been right for her to encourage her own son's blossoming love. Yet her conscience—or perhaps, rather, the pity she felt for her memories of her old self—caused her to say, "At this moment, it's still possible for you to escape. I would help you."

Maomao looked dubious at that.

"Oh, that look," said Ah-Duo. "I still have some modest privilege left, you know."

Less than modest, really, but if she stretched, she could manage something.

It was not Maomao but Chue who responded: "Now, now, wait just a moment!"

"What?"

"Lady Ah-Duo, I can't square this circle. If you do that, I'll never be able to carry out my orders! Didn't you say my job was to 'make the Moon Prince happy'?"

Ah-Duo laughed. "Come, now. If a man can be despondent over losing one single woman, well, that's all the more man he is. Surely a talented servant could find others to fill the gap?"

"Now you're talking silly talk." Chue crossed her arms and tilted her head.

Ah-Duo had once been part of a banquet in the western capital that had doubled, in a way, as a chance for Yue to meet potential matches. Everyone gathered there had been present in hopes of becoming the consort of the Imperial younger brother, so Ah-Duo had resolved not to intercede: Anyone he might pick had been there because they had hoped he might pick her.

After that, and after briefly being under the misimpression that Yue had some strange proclivities, Ah-Duo had been relieved when she heard that it was simply that his heart was set on Maomao. That, she was confident, meant that no vixen or villainess would take advantage of him.

However, Ah-Duo also knew Maomao, and she couldn't help seeing herself in the young woman.

Now Maomao looked at Ah-Duo. "Lady Ah-Duo. I couldn't care less about Miss Chue's mission, but it was because she accepted it that I'm in the position I am now."

"Are you sure about this? You won't regret it?"

“I mean to negotiate as best I can to ensure that I don’t.”

“Hee hee! Planning to have a big greenhouse built on the palace grounds?” Chue drawled.

“Sounds pretty good to me.”

The fact that Maomao and Chue could banter even at a moment like this went to show how well they got along. If anything, Ah-Duo’s words seemed to strengthen Maomao’s resolve.

“Maybe an orchard while you’re at it? Miss Chue would love to be able to stuff herself with fresh lychees! Just like one of those legendary beauties.”

“It might be possible, if we grow them in my greenhouse. But too many lychees can make you dizzy.”

“Oh me, oh my! Surely a hundred or so should be all right, though?”

“Stick to about ten.”

It was a silly conversation, but somehow, Ah-Duo found herself relaxing as she listened. She had always thought Maomao was a young woman who simply lived as she pleased, anyone else’s expectations be damned. She would have to apologize for having misjudged her. Though she was free, Maomao was a more flexible person than Ah-Duo had realized. Faced with a confined place, she didn’t seek to escape or even destroy it, but changed her form in order to get whatever she could out of the situation.

It was a way of living that had never occurred to the fourteen-year-old Ah-Duo.

“But it’s certainly one way to go about life,” she murmured. She remembered the request she had once made of Yoh: *“Make me the mother of the country.”*

She had been sure that, if those were the strings she attached, he would give up on keeping her around. They could just say they’d been joking, that it was all in good fun.

But they had been the wrong words.

“Let me remain your friend.”

That was what she should have said, even if it was futile. She should have told him what she was really thinking.

Even now, some twenty years after that promise had been made, Ah-Duo couldn’t be apart from Yoh. She had left the rear palace, but found herself faced with the unorthodox measure of being sequestered in an annex. Normally, a high consort—even a former one—would have had to continue living within the rear

palace walls.

Because she had been given her own residence even after being expelled from the rear palace, no one could or did ignore Ah-Duo.

Simple banishment might have been easier. Instead Ah-Duo was kept here in her pavilion, entrusted with Suirei and the Shi clan children. As if to tell her that even now that she was no longer the Emperor's "instructor," no longer his consort, she still had work to do.

Abruptly, Ah-Duo sighed. "Have I become a weight around his neck?" Was Yoh now trying to constrain not just Ah-Duo, but her son as well?

And was that son trying to constrain Maomao?

That was the thought that had made her ache at her powerlessness, that had led to her suggestion to Maomao. But she had misread the young woman. Maomao was far more flexible and strong and stubborn than Ah-Duo.

"Maomao," she said.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Is there anything you want?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"I don't know much about herbs and all that, but I could give you a treasure from my time as consort. If you sold it, I presume it would bring in enough to buy you a nice medicine or two."

The suggestion was Ah-Duo's way of apologizing for having called Maomao out here. Covering one's faults with money and gifts was somewhat crass, but she didn't expect Maomao to object.

"A treasure, ma'am? You wouldn't happen to have any pearls, would you?"

"Pearls? That's unexpected. Are you a fan of them?"

"Oh, yes! They're good for eye diseases, skin problems, and all kinds of other things!" Maomao's eyes lit up. "I'm honestly more concerned about quantity than quality—I'm just going to grind them up, anyway."

She knew perfectly well that any of Ah-Duo's accessories would have been gifts from His Majesty, but she didn't hide the fact that she planned to destroy them.

Ah-Duo couldn't hold back a laugh. "Ha ha ha ha! Take whatever you like. And what about coral—do you need some of that?"

"If I could, ma'am!"

“Oh! What a waste!” Chue was practically sucking her fingers in an *I wish I could have some* gesture, but she soon replaced her fingers with baked treats.

Ah-Duo laughed uproariously, and privately she made a wish:

Don’t let Yue walk the same path as Yoh.

Chapter 15: Jinshi's Shock, Maomao's Resolution

The incense worked its way into Jinshi's nose.

"Don't you think it's a bit strong?" he asked. He was talking with Suiren as he ate his dinner.

"Maybe you're just not used to it anymore. You spent so long in the western capital, where we had to conserve incense."

"You think so?"

Jinshi picked up some meat with his chopsticks. This dish used plenty of tender pork, and even though the meat was fatty, the spices gave it a clean, refreshing flavor. Other offerings included eel stir-fry, snapping-turtle soup, and more—in fact, there was noticeably more food here than usual, including many that boosted stamina.

"The meal seems awfully heavy tonight," Jinshi remarked.

"Maybe you're just not used to it anymore. It's that long stay in the western capital. Go on now, eat up!" Suiren said, and chuckled. "Ho ho ho ho!"

This all struck Jinshi as very strange. Then he looked over at the guard at the door to his chambers.

"Wasn't Basen on duty tonight?"

"Basen has some kind of gathering of the named clans tomorrow, so I sent him home. He'd talked about something with Maamei that left him very fidgety."

"Basen and Maamei, talking about something?"

Jinshi began to suspect Maamei was plotting something. At the moment, however, he had a feeling the plot he should be worried about was Suiren's.

"What's with the flower petals floating in my bath?" he asked. They'd been a nuisance, sticking to his skin as he'd tried to bathe.

"Wasn't the temperature just perfect? And I put in some herbs and minerals that promote good blood flow and metabolism."

At this point, even Jinshi was starting to connect the dots. After

all, he had made similar preparations for the Emperor during his time in the rear palace. If Suiren was doing all this, it meant someone was coming this evening.

And Jinshi had sent Maomao a letter a few days before.

"Suiren. Could it be..."

"Maomao is coming tonight. It's been so long since we saw her! You wrote to her several times, didn't you?"

It was true, Jinshi had sent her a number of letters—mostly pedestrian reports of his recent goings-on. He hadn't sent her explicit instructions to visit him at his residence. He had, however, said he wished to see her and talk. Just whenever she had a moment. When work wasn't too busy.

"Hold on a second. It's just Maomao, right?"

It had been more than two weeks since they had returned to the royal capital, and this would be the first time Maomao was coming to Jinshi's residence.

"The last time you saw each other was when you were getting off the boat, yes? Oh, everyone has been so busy ever since we got home! She sent word that she finally had a moment to catch her breath."

"All right, but if Maomao is coming, then what's all this?"

Jinshi looked toward his bedroom. Incense was burning—a stronger smell than usual—while the bedclothes had all been changed, rose petals—out of season!—scattered on top, and the normal canopy of his bed had been exchanged for a translucent woven one with a flower pattern. Vases of flowers and beeswax candles dotted the room, providing a sweet aroma along with a gently flickering light that gave the chamber a fantastical atmosphere.

Jinshi quickly put out the incense and candles and opened the window to change the air. He threw the flower petals in the trash and put away the vases.

"Huff... Puff..."

"Oh, goodness!"

"Don't *oh goodness* me! What are you doing to my room?!"

Maomao had once attempted to entertain Jinshi at the Verdigris House—and what was happening here reminded him of that day.

"Well, ambience is so important to any endeavor. You and Maomao share the same feelings now, young master."

"The... The same feelings!"

In a mounting panic, Jinshi began to look this way and that; he tried to affect nonchalance, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

"It did take such a long time. I can't tell you how this old lady worried! To see my young master—our nation's jewel, the man they call an immortal treasure manifested in the human realm, who attracts young and old, men and women alike—revert to acting like a child his age. Then again, many young men your age already have children of their own..."

"Erm, ahem, I don't... That's not..."

Jinshi hadn't exactly hidden what had happened with Maomao from Suiren, but he hadn't spelled it out for her either. There had been so many other people on that boat that they hadn't had much —really, any—time to be alone together. He'd been so sure no one had noticed anything.

"I may be an old lady, but my woman's intuition is still as sharp as ever!" Suiren said, with another chortle. "Ooh hoo hoo!" She squinted merrily, and Jinshi found himself truly afraid.

Jinshi scratched his head, looking as awkward as he felt. "All right, but...this is Maomao we're talking about."

"Yes, and Maomao is more than twenty years old, you know. She may be an innocent maiden, but she has *knowledge*. When a gentleman sends her a letter that's not about work and asks her to come to his room, I'm sure she understands what that means." Suiren smiled openly as she spoke.

"But... But this room!"

"I simply thought it might be best to be open about it."

"It's *too* open! The atmosphere should be more subtle, more thoughtful—no, no, that's not my point!"

Jinshi sat on the edge of his bed and tore at his hair. He was beginning to feel something, something more than just embarrassment. He took a swig of the water by his bed, trying to distract himself.

"Oh! That's—"

"Pbbbt!"

It was very strange-tasting water. In fact, the smell, however faint, was alcoholic.

"Suiren. What did you put in this?"

The water wasn't poisoned, as such, but what was in it was not unlike what had been in his dinner. He felt his pulse quicken and his body grow hot.

“Heavens, I only put in the slightest bit, and you still noticed? I promise it’s not poison.”

“Of course I noticed! And Maomao’s going to sniff it out the minute she gets close.”

Suiren reluctantly collected the carafe.

“Phew...” Jinshi took a deep breath, trying to calm his pounding heart. What was an adult man, already more than twenty years old, doing feeling so shaken by this? More than one woman had sneaked into his bedchamber, after all. He’d found himself pressed to their generous chests, moist red lips coming toward him. He’d been nauseated by the overpowering smell of incense. He remembered the guards dragging those people away by the hair as they screeched. He’d tried to ignore them, but he felt he knew womankind through and through.

But he had been, as the proverb had it, a frog in a well.

“A frog...”

It was an unpleasant word to remember. He unconsciously glanced down between his legs, then realized he’d been poisoned by Maomao. He was sure that wasn’t an ordinary word for...that part of the anatomy.

“Calm down, calm down!” he repeated to himself as if intoning the words of a sutra. Maybe he should do some training.

Jinshi was still thinking himself in circles when his visitor arrived.

“Ah, hello, Maomao, it’s been much too long. Please, come in.”

“Yes, Lady Suiren.”

Jinshi heard her voice, tired and sluggish. He straightened his collar and took a deep breath. Then he headed for the living room, trying to act as if nothing were amiss.

Maomao, as usual, looked like she was already half asleep. She was holding a large cloth sack.

“It’s been quite a while,” he said.

“Yes, Master Jinshi.”

“Do you want something to drink?”

This was normally the part where Suiren would put out tea, but today was different. Instead there were beautiful glass vessels filled with fragrant distilled spirits. They were powerfully alcoholic; even when Jinshi wanted such a drink, she never let him have one, because it would impact his work the next day. Now there it was before him, and in some quantity.

“Oooh! Ooooh!” Maomao, her eyes shining, was entranced by the amber liquid. The way she began to drool revealed exactly how much she did want a drink.

Still, it wouldn't do for her to completely forget Jinshi was there, so he pointedly put some snacks in front of her. "Alcohol alone is bad for the body," he said.

The snacks were a mixture of walnuts, peanuts, and pine nuts, gently toasted and lightly salted. They were accompanied by dried figs and longan, but Maomao had eyes only for the alcohol.

"How is work?" Jinshi asked.

"The first day back, a corpse was discovered in the freak strategist's office and we had to investigate the death."

She jumped right in with the most astounding thing.

"Did the strategist do it?" Jinshi asked, just to be sure.

"That old fart wouldn't dirty his own hands. Not physically. Anyway, as it turned out, it was garden-variety jealousy. If it had been him, surely you would have heard about it, Master Jinshi."

"Fair point."

Physically—she seemed to be implying that Lakan didn't have the strength. That was true enough, he thought, calling to mind Lakan's total lack of physical prowess. The one thing he did have was initiative. With that thought in mind, Jinshi looked at Maomao. She was frail, but utterly audacious. In spite of her tendency to lack motivation, when she got the bit between her teeth, she was formidable.

He was reminded anew how much father and daughter resembled each other. At the same time, the question of whether Lakan was aware that Maomao was at Jinshi's residence at this moment was a terrifying one.

Maomao was drinking the alcohol and obviously enjoying it. Suiren had prepared some for Jinshi as well, though unlike Maomao's, it was cut with water. Jinshi could hold his liquor reasonably well, but Maomao could drink him under the table. If he simply started gulping down distilled spirits, he was going to pass out.

"And what about you, Master Jinshi? How is your work?"

"The same as always. I made my report to His Majesty, but my position remains much as it was before. I always seem to have to entertain the most absurd petitions. Still, I'm not as busy as I was in the western capital."

"You're still young, sir, and you've got plenty of stamina. That's the only reason you're still alive. Most people would have worked themselves to death by now."

Maomao accompanied this comment with an “oooh!” and smacked her lips at the alcohol.

“Did you have dinner before you came?” he asked.

“No, sir. It’s too much trouble to make by myself, so I skipped it.”

“I have leftovers from mine. Would you like them?”

Just drinking the alcohol without even touching the snack wouldn’t be good for her. Suiren had been so excited about dinner that she’d made a great deal of it. Maybe she’d deliberately made enough for Maomao.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t...” Maomao looked conflicted. It was unusual; she of all people never had to be asked twice.

“Is there some reason you wouldn’t eat it?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it a *reason* as such...” She looked at the ground. “But I’ve made some preparations of my own.”

Jinshi put down his drink. Maomao looked much the same as she always did, but he thought her skin glowed a bit more than usual. The tan she’d gotten in the western capital was slowly fading. She hadn’t drawn in her freckles; instead, she’d used just a touch of whitening powder.

Mingled with the scent of the incense in the room, Jinshi thought he could catch a whiff of scented oil that Maomao was wearing. Her hair seemed the slightest bit damp—she must have bathed before she came.

Maomao emptied her glass. “May I go rinse my mouth?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Normally he might have expected her to empty the bottle, then ask for another one.

“Then perhaps we should go within, Master Jinshi.”

“Er... Yes, of course.”

What was this? He felt like he was dreaming. No, no. He shouldn’t *expect* too much. She would check the brand on his flank like she always did, and that would be it.

“Is it just me, Master Jinshi, or are you a bit out of sorts tonight?”

“Wh-Who, me? No, no.”

Maomao, usually so calm and collected, almost looked self-conscious.

“May I ask something, Maomao? Just to be sure?” Jinshi

swallowed hard. He had to be clear about this. “You know what it means to enter my bedroom at this moment, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s not about caring for any illness or treating any injury.”

“I’m aware, sir—that informed the preparations I made.”

She showed him what she had brought with her, and Jinshi’s face got hotter than ever. He was desperate to look calm; in an effort to seem composed, he turned away.

Suiren was suddenly nowhere to be found, and his guards could and had read the room. Basen wasn’t there.

“You don’t need a bath?”

“I’ve bathed. Although if you wish, I’ll do so again.”

“No, it’s all right.” From the way Maomao smelled, Jinshi had known that she must have bathed.

He put his hand on his heart in an effort to slow it down; it was beating so hard he was sure she could hear it.

It was Jinshi who wished he could take a bath—he’d done so earlier, but between the alcohol and...everything else...he was sweating profusely. However, he couldn’t beg leave to wash himself at that moment; instead, they headed into the bedchamber.

The room had aired out, and the suffocating smell of incense was gone. The flower petals on the bed had vanished, as had the water with the strange medicaments.

Now, what would happen next?

He couldn’t wait for his heart to stop pounding anymore. His cheeks were still flushed, but it was a little late to be worried about that.

Jinshi gently picked Maomao up. She’d gained a little weight since the last time he’d held her, but still she was light. Her hair smelled of camellia oil.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I told you I came prepared for this, didn’t I?” She averted her eyes as if begging him not to make her say it again. He found it a little annoying, but very Maomao-esque.

He wasn’t the only nervous one; she was too. Realizing he wasn’t alone gave Jinshi some relief.

“What kind of preparations did you make?” he asked her.

“I skipped breakfast and dinner.”

That, he hadn’t expected. “Why? Were you so busy experimenting that you forgot to eat?”

“I also stopped drinking water half a day ago. I suppose I should have abstained from alcohol too, but the drink earlier was so delicious, I had to have just one cup.”

“Water too?” Jinshi couldn’t imagine what would be the point of such measures.

“Ideally I should skip food for three days and water for an entire day. I’m sorry I couldn’t do better. I have tomorrow off, but today I had work, so I needed some energy.”

“Seriously, what are you talking about?”

“It’s what we do at the Verdigris House when an important customer buys someone’s first time. There can’t be anything to spoil the moment. Better to starve and thirst for a little while than to taste an enraged client’s fist.”

“I’m not sure *buy* is the word I would’ve chosen for this…” Jinshi scowled. No matter the context, he didn’t want Maomao to torment herself that way.

“I’m not sure I’ll be very skilled at any of this. And I’ll shame myself if I fail.”

Maomao’s eyes were serious. He’d learned that she had the soul of a craftsperson, bent on doing her very best at anything she attempted, no matter what it was.

Still confused, Jinshi let out a breath. The point was, she wasn’t going to try to finagle a way out, like she had last time. She was being proactive, which made him very happy.

“Also, may I have some boiled water?”

“Feeling thirsty after all?”

“No.”

Maomao opened the large cloth package. Out came packets of medicine, along with all sorts of other things Jinshi didn’t recognize.

“What’s all this?”

“They have lantern plant root, whiteblossom, and balsam berries in them, among other things.”

Jinshi recognized all those names, and the combination meant something to him.

“Those are all plants you said to be wary of in the rear palace!” he exclaimed, more loudly than he’d meant to.

“That’s right.” Maomao was completely blasé.

The rear palace was a place for giving birth to and raising the Emperor’s children. It had to be purged of anything that might be

harmful. Hence all of these plants were forbidden there.

"Why do you have those here?"

"Lady Suiren has already vetted them. Don't worry, sir, I'm not going to use them on you. They're for me." Once again, her eyes were completely serious. "I have tools that can do physical damage as well, but they aren't very effective, and I know you don't appreciate that sort of thing, Master Jinshi, so I thought it might be best not to use them."

Next Maomao took out some kind of cylinder carefully wrapped in paper. "This is made with ox intestines, and I wasn't sure how that would sit with you..." She gently put away the thing made with the intestine of an ox—whatever it was.

"I get it. These are all to prevent pregnancy?"

"Yes, sir."

"So when you said you had worked hard to prepare..."

"I gathered everything I could get my hands on in the pleasure district."

Jinshi promptly blanched. He felt cold all over.

"Having accepted your feelings, Master Jinshi, I also accept what comes with them, even having relations. But I must draw a bright line when it comes to that agreement: I will not become Empress Gyokuyou's enemy."

Jinshi bit his lip hard. He'd been thoughtless. Had he forgotten who and what he was? To Maomao he might be Jinshi, but what did everyone else call him? The Emperor's own younger brother, Ka Zuigetsu—the Moon Prince.

Empress Gyokuyou's son, the crown prince, was still very young, and moreover, he resembled his mother. Most Linese had black hair and eyes, and more than a few might look askance at one with red hair and green eyes standing atop the whole nation. Thus, there were those within the court who called for Consort Lihua's son to be made crown prince, or for Jinshi to be returned to the position.

In those circumstances, for Jinshi to conceive a child with a young woman to whom he was not even married—imagine what that would mean. Imagine what people would do if they found out the young woman was Maomao, Kan Lakan's own daughter. Because Lakan was currently neutral, people would perceive that a new faction had been formed at court. The ambiguous nature of the relationship would invite misunderstanding and pushback, and,

very much in spite of what Jinshi or Maomao might wish, a tiny snowball would start rolling down the mountain, growing until it became unstoppable.

Maomao might not be one for politics, but she had a keen nose for danger.

"I've also charted the course of the month, and I think this should be a relatively safe night. However, please don't concern yourself even if there should be an accident. I know how to deal with it."

It was almost certainly true. If a child was conceived, Maomao would take care of the matter. She would certainly not raise it in secret. It might sound cruel, but it was right: Any child might be a spark that lit a conflagration. This would be cruelty in the pursuit of peace. And the damage would be kept to an absolute minimum.

Jinshi hugged Maomao tight. Not out of the animal lust that had been building in him until moments ago. He felt such guilt and pain that he thought he would shatter his own teeth for clenching his jaw.

"I'm sorry to make you be the careful one."

He rested his chin on her shoulder. She gave him a soothing pat on the back. "It's all right, sir."

Jinshi felt it was something close to a miracle that he had met a woman like Maomao. That was why he didn't want to let her go. He'd gone so far as to press a brand into his own side, all to keep her.

"Sorry," he said again, and then although he hated to do it, he let her go. He pushed down his desire to simply hold on to her forever and sprawled back on the bed.

"Master Jinshi?"

He covered his face with his hands. "You can go home for today. Take some dinner with you, if you like. You must be hungry. If it's gone cold, you can reheat it in a bamboo steamer."

"I understand, sir." Maomao gathered up her things and went to leave the room. "If you'll excuse me, then," she said, but as she left the bedchamber she murmured something.

"This is all right," Jinshi mumbled. "This is enough for now."

He needed to be clear on his own position. He couldn't remain the Emperor's younger brother forever. He would have to demonstrate that he was no enemy to Empress Gyokuyou or Consort Lihua. A brand on the flank wouldn't be enough. He needed

to do something clearer, more public.

Cast aside his position as His Majesty's brother and give up the Imperial family: That was the only way.

"What do I do?" Jinshi pondered, thinking so hard he wondered if his hair might start to fall out.

He was so busy thinking that he missed the last thing Maomao said as she left: "I also planned for the possibility that nothing would happen."

She knew Jinshi just had too much on his mind.

Chapter 16: Maomao and the Late Dinner

Maomao heated her dinner in the dormitory kitchen. She was just back, seen off by a Suiren who had looked positively crestfallen.

Maomao would admit to being a bit put off her stride, but she was also secretly relieved. She had the knowledge, yes, but she was still a virgin herself, so she wasn't sure about everything. The whole reason she'd gone to Jinshi so prepared was because she figured it would be easier to be ready mentally if she was the one who got things started.

Once her dinner was warm, Maomao went to her room. Spring had come, but the evenings were still chilly. Bad manners though it might be, she decided to eat in bed.

Suiren had stuffed some buns full of cubes of stewed pork, eel stir-fry, and so on so it would be easy to carry back. The soup she'd put in a bottle, and it was still warm.

"All foods that boost stamina," Maomao observed with a wry smile, then dug into the buns. Nothing was so tasty as a dinner made by someone else. Spiced with hunger from not eating, it was even better.

She cleaned her plate, then sipped at the alcohol Suiren had given her.

"Now what to do?" she mumbled.

She could take a guess why Jinshi had turned her down that night. He was no longer going to force his feelings upon her. His actions tonight showed he was giving Maomao priority. Even so, with the wind so out of her sails, Maomao wondered how she was supposed to face Jinshi after this.

"I guess I won't see him for a while, anyway."

She'd worry about it the next time they got together, she decided, neatly kicking the problem down the road. She had high hopes for her future self's ingenuity.

The alcohol was strong stuff—Maomao didn't get drunk, but she started to feel happier, a happiness that brought with it a pleasant drowsiness. She found thoughts passing aimlessly through her mind.

"I heard Lahan's Brother is back."

Chue had told her. She supposed she ought to go see him, much as she hated visiting the freak strategist's house to do it.

"I'd like to see Meimei too."

It sounded like she was being treated well enough at the Go Sage's house. Maybe she could get Lahan to finagle a meeting with Meimei for her.

"And I can't believe that guy was one of Joka's customers," she said. The drowsiness and the drink made her mind play games of free association, leaping from Meimei to Joka. "Wonder what he wanted, looking for Imperial family members."

The thought of former branches of that family made her remember Tianyu.

"Wonder if Joka and Tianyu could be related?"

Joka swore a brigand had planted the seed of her, but if he hadn't been a bandit, but a hunter, that would match up. He'd damaged the jade tablet not only to hide his Imperial blood, but also the fact that he was from a criminal's family. There was still no telling why the tablet had been broken, but a hunter would explain the "beastly" smell and gnarled hands.

"Maybe this Wang Fang guy was looking for former Imperial family members all over court."

Maybe it was the rumors of such people that had brought him to the palace in the first place. He'd been trying to use the women to learn whatever he could.

"But Tianyu himself was in the western capital..."

The alcohol and the sleepiness were muddling her thoughts. It crossed her mind that she should brush her teeth, but sleep won out. Maomao set the bottle aside and let her eyes drift shut.

Translator's Notes – *The Apothecary Diaries* vol. 13

Watch Your Tone

In previous installments of The *Apothecary Diaries* Diaries, we've talked about how translators make choices about the particular kinds of vocabulary that are appropriate to a given passage or work, and even how sentences are structured in the target versus the source language. These aren't just concerns for basic narration, though. Any work of fiction lives and dies on its characters, and *The Apothecary Diaries* is bursting with them, from prim-and-proper officials to noble folk to criminals, courtesans, and, well, apothecaries!

To a certain extent, representing these varied voices in translation means having a command of the same tools that someone writing an English-language work would use to communicate who their characters are, but of course, a translator must do this while also being mindful of the way the characters sound in the original text. It's partly creation and partly "re-creation."

Take a simple example: *urusee* (or *urusei*). This is a single word, a slurring of the adjective *urusai*, which means *loud* or *noisy (in an obnoxious way)*. This kind of slurring is characteristic of tough-guy characters, or at least angry ones.

With that information in mind, consider the possible translation: "I'm sorry, but you're being a little bit noisy."

It doesn't have the same feel, does it? The *tone* is completely different; the translation makes the speaker sound polite, even timid. Unless there's some reason in the text to render *urusee* in such a voice, our possible translation would probably not be appropriate. Something like "Quiet!" or "Pipe down!" or a good old-fashioned "Shaddup!" would likely be better.

One character who embodies this distinction is our favorite

protagonist, Maomao. She sees herself as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, so she speaks deferentially to almost everyone around her. (In Japanese, what's often called "polite" language—for example, the sentence/verb endings *desu* and *-masu*—is really about relating to the people around you in a socially appropriate manner.) What Maomao thinks in her own head, however, is only heard by the reader and (thankfully) not the subjects of her inner voice. Therefore, she feels no compulsion to be particularly polite toward them. This is a distinction that can and should be represented in the translation.

The question of character voice goes beyond obvious differences in usage, however. A word may be translated differently depending on the character using it, as well as their relationship to the listener. Consider an expression as simple as *konnichiwa*. In a completely neutral context, this might simply be rendered *hello*. A more aristocratic character might say *good day*—or perhaps, if speaking down to someone, *hello there*. If Lihaku is greeting Maomao, say, it could even become something like *hullo!*

Likewise, other vocabulary choices are informed by a character's background. An aristocrat is likely to use more "big" words than an uneducated commoner, so if they each use the word *kaitai* (to disassemble, to break down), a scientist may use the term *dissect*, a noble might be more likely to use *render,* a chef might say *butcher*, and a commoner might say *chop up*.

There's an element of subjectivity to this, but again, the translator must always remain aware of the original text, as in our *urusee* example above. The character's voice is present in the Japanese; the job of the translator is to represent it using the full range of tools available in English. Granted, different translators may come to slightly different conclusions about how a given character should sound in English—translators also each have their own voice, like any writer, and as much as the Japanese author's voice takes precedence in any translation, its exact sound will always be influenced by the voice speaking along with it. One reason editors are an important part of the translation process is to help check whether the translator has successfully communicated the voice of the original. ("I don't think so-and-so would use that word," Sasha might say to me.) This is part of the beauty of the connection that translation fosters, a reminder that when we connect to an author through translation, we do it with the help of

other human beings.

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